ソードアート・オンライン9
アリシゼーション・ビギニング

「ここは……どこだ……？」

目を覚ますと、キリトは巨木が連なる森の中――ファンタジーの≪仮想世界≫に入り込んでいた。手がかりを求めて辺りを彷徨う彼は、一人の少年と出会う。

「僕の名前はユージオ。よろしく、キリト君」

この仮想世界の住人――つまり≪ＮＰＣ≫である少年は、なんら人間と変わらない感情の豊かさを持ち合わせていた。ユージオと親交を深めていくキリトの脳裏に、とある過去の記憶がよみがえる。

それは、子供時代のキリトがユージオと一緒に野山を駆け回っている記憶だった。そしてそこには、ユージオともう一人、金色の髪を持つ少女の姿があった。

名前は、アリス。

忘れてはいけないはずの、大切な名前だった。

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アニメーション制作の現場に触れさせて頂いて、改めて『作品というのは一人で作ってるわけじゃないな！』と感じました。アニメはもちろん、小説もそうですね……。今年はそのことを再認識しつつ頑張ります！

【電撃文庫作品】

アクセル・ワールド 1～10
ソードアート・オンライン 1～9

イラスト：abec

あべしっ！

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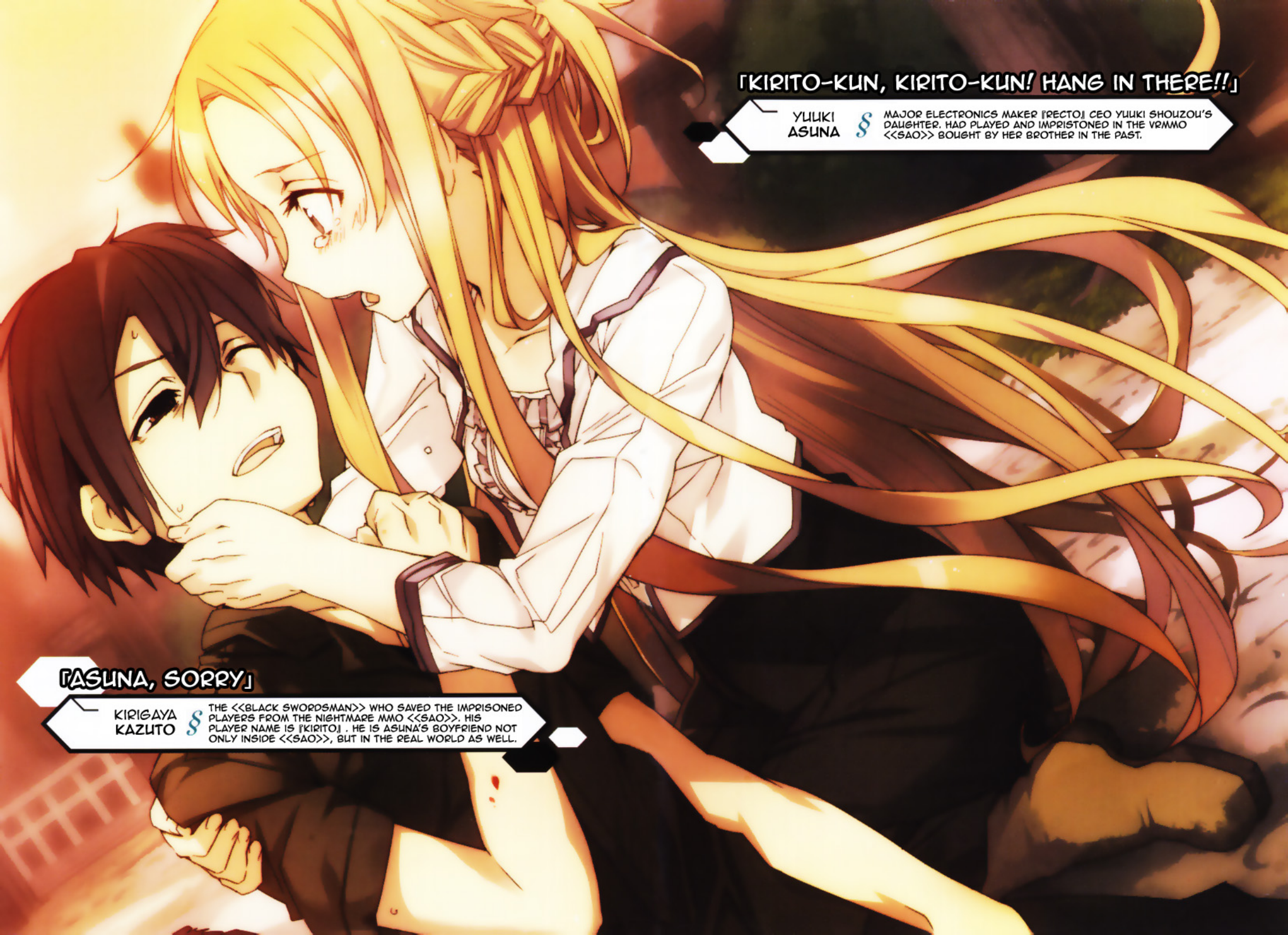
「KIRITO-KUN, KIRITO-KUN! HANG IN THERE!!」
YUUKI ASUNA § MAJOR ELECTRONICS MAKER『RECTO』CEO YUUKI SHOUZOU'S DAUGHTER. HAD PLAYED AND IMPRISTONED IN THE VRMMO <<SAO>> BOUGHT BY HER BROTHER IN THE PAST.
「ASUNA, SORRY」
KIRIGAYA KAZUTO § THE <<BLACK SWORDSMAN>> WHO SAVED THE IMPRISONED PLAYERS FROM THE NIGHTMARE MMO <<SAO>>. HIS PLAYER NAME IS『KIRITO』. HE IS ASUNA'S BOYFRIEND NOT ONLY INSIDE <<SAO>>, BUT IN THE REAL WORLD AS WELL.

「WE WON'T KNOW UNTIL WE TRY, RIGHT?」
KIRITO § THE BOY WHO GOT LOST IN THE MYSTERIOUS FANTASY TYPE <<VIRTUAL WORLD>>.
「THIS IS UNEXPECTEDLY DIFFICULT. AT FIRST, EVEN I COULDN'T STRIKE AT THE RIGHT PLACE.」
EUGEO § THE FIRST DWELLER OF THIS WORLD KIRITO MET. DUE TO THE SACRED TASK, HE HAS THE DUTY TO CUT DOWN THE EVIL TREE <<GIGAS CEDAR>>.

「IT'S ANNOYING, JUST KILL THEM AND TURN THEM INTO MEAT.」
UGACHI, THE LIZARD KILLER
§
THE LEADER OF THE GOBLIN TRIBE LURKING IN THE NORTHERN CAVE RUNNING THROUGH THE MOUNTAIN RANGE AT THE EDGE.
「WHAT'S UP WITH TODAY? TWO MORE WHITE ILUM BRATS JUST ROLLED IN!」
「WHAT SHOULD WE DO ABOUT THEM, SEIZE THEM TOO?」
「GOT IT? WE'LL HELP SELKA. WE MUST HELP HER.」
「.....I'VE, NEVER SWUNG A SWORD BEFORE.」

«Map of Rulid Village and its Surrounding Areas»

A dweller of Underworld, Eugeo, lives in Rulid village, located at the «Edge of the Human World», in the remote northern region of «Norlangarth North Empire», which is one of the four great empires that divide and rule over the «Human World». The village with three hundred years of history is on a terrain surrounded by a steep mountain range to its north, east, and west, so its dwellers have poor living standards. At the entrance of the southern forest, the «Evil Tree» Gigas Cedar, which roots absorb nutrition from its surrounding areas, stands tall, preventing the villagers from spreading their fields or pastures toward the southern forest. Therefore, for generations, the village passes down the Sacred Task to cut down the Gigas Cedar trunk using the «Dragon Bone Axe», which is able to cut even iron. To the north of Rulid village is the «Mountain range at the Edge». Beyond it is the land that light couldn't reach, «Dark Territory». To the south is the town of Zakkaria, and further south is the heart of «Human World», the capital city Centoria, in which the Axiom Church rules over the four empires.

イラスト／来栖達也

Prologue I

(The Seventh Month of Human World Calendar 372)

Part 1

Grasping the axe.

Swinging upwards.

Striking down.

It might be just those actions, but if the mind was distracted even slightly, the reaction from the hard bark would bounce back relentlessly to both arms. Breathing, timing, speed, shifting of body weight, all of them must be perfectly controlled from the beginning, transmitting the hidden power from the heavy blade of the axe to the tree, producing a pleasant, clear, high-pitched sound.

While he could understand the theory well, actually doing it wasn't that simple. Eugeo was given this task in the spring when he was ten, and it would be the second coming of summer since then, yet he could only get that pleasant feedback once out of ten swings. He was told by fellow axe users that his predecessor Garitta-jiisan always hit the bull's eye, and even though he didn't show his fatigue after brandishing the heavy axe, but after merely fifty times Eugeo's hands went numb, his shoulders became sore, and he could no longer lift up his arms.

"Forty…… three! Forty…… four!"

He counted with his loudest voice to push himself while striking the axe on the great tree's trunk, the sweat gushing out caused his eyes to blur, his hands became slippery, and his accuracy continually decreased. Partly due to his desperation, he grasped the woodcutting axe tightly and brandished it over his body.

"Forty…… nine! Fif……t……y!!"

His last strike was a big deviation from his usual skill, it hit the bark a distance away from the deep cut on the trunk, producing an ear-splitting metallic sound. Due to the reaction which was as if it could make a spark come out of his eyes, Eugeo dropped the axe, staggered a few steps back, then sat down on the thick moss.

While he repeated his rough breathing, he heard a voice mixed with laughter from his right.

"The good sound came out three out of fifty times. So the total is, erm, forty-one huh. It seems today's Siral water is your treat, Eugeo."

The owner of the voice, who was lying down slightly further away, was a young boy of a similar age. Eugeo didn't reply immediately, but fumbled for the leather water canteen then picked it up. He greedily drank the water, which had become completely warm. After he became comfortable he closed it with the hard cork, then said,

"Hmn, yours is only forty-three, isn't it? I'll catch up soon anyway. Here, it's your turn…… Kirito."

"Yeah yeah."

Kirito was Eugeo's childhood friend and also his best friend, as well as his partner in this melancholy «Sacred Task» since spring last year. Kirito wiped the sweat off his black forelock, stretched his legs straight and raised his body. But he didn't pick up the axe immediately; his hand was on his hip while he looked up above his head. Attracted by his action, Eugeo also looked up toward the sky.

The mid summer sky of the seventh month was still ridiculously blue, stuck at the center was the sun god Solus, which shone its overwhelming light from the sky. However, the light was obstructed by the branches of the great tree outstretched in all directions, most of it didn't reach the roots where Eugeo and Kirito were.

At the same time the countless leaves of the great tree devoured the sun god's blessing, its roots also relentlessly absorbed the favor of the earth god Terraria, allowing it to recover from Eugeo and Kirito's hard work of steadily cutting it down. No matter how much they did during the day, after a night's rest, when they came back the next morning, the tree would have already recovered half of the cut wounds from the previous day.

Eugeo sighed lightly as he looked back to the tree from the sky.

The great tree —— the «Gigas Cedar», its sacred name was given by the villagers, was the monster with a diameter of four mels, and had a height of seventy mels. The bell tower of the village church, which was the tallest building in the village, was only one quarter its height; to Eugeo and Kirito

whose height only passed one and a half mels this year, this ancient titan was a very suitable opponent.

Is it unreasonable to cut down this guy using man power? —— Eugeo couldn't help but think about this after seeing the cut on the trunk. The wedge-shaped cut wound had finally reached a depth of one mel, but the remainder of the trunk with three times the thickness was still healthy.

In spring last year, when he and Kirito were taken to village chief's residence, as they were at the suitable age for the duty of «Chopping the giant tree», he had heard a mind-boggling story.

The Gigas Cedar had stretched its roots here long before Rulid village was founded, and the duty to cut the tree had been passed down the generations since the first settlers' time. Counting from the first generation to his predecessor Garitta-jii, of the sixth generation, Eugeo and Kirito were the seventh generation. More than three hundred years had passed before they were given the duty.

————Three hundred years!

At that time, it was an unimaginable span for Eugeo, who had just reached his tenth birthday. Of course, that hadn't changed even though he was eleven now. What he somehow could understand was, from the time of his parents, his grandparents, the time before that, and the time even further back, the amount of axe swings combined from those with this duty could be said to be infinite, and the result was just this cutting wound less than a mel deep.

Why was cutting down the great tree so important? The reason was explained in a severe tone by the village chief.

The Gigas Cedar, with its huge body and its excessive vitality, took away the blessings of the sun and earth gods from its surrounding area in an enormous range. Seeds sown on the land in the shadow of the great tree wouldn't grow, any effort to plant anything near it was futile.

Rulid village was a part of the «Norlangarth North Empire», one of the four empires that divided and ruled over the «Human World», and it was also located in the remote northern region. In other words, this place could literally be called the edge of the world. North, east, and west, these three sides were surrounded by a steep mountain range, so in order to expand the fields or pastures, there was no way other than to cut down the forest

in the south. However, that couldn't be done due to the Gigas Cedar which was rooted at the entrance of the forest.

It had been said that its bark was as hard as iron, and even fire couldn't cause the slightest burn, digging it up was also not possible as its roots were as deep as it was tall. Therefore the village founders had decided to chop its trunk down using the «Dragon Bone Axe» which could cut even iron, and the duty to do so had been passed down generations since then——

The village chief finished telling the mission in his trembling voice, it made Eugeo feel terrible, so he asked, why shouldn't they just leave the Gigas Cedar alone and open up the forest further south.

Then the village chief replied in a frightening voice that cutting down the tree was their ancestors' vow, that vocation had turned into the village's custom to entrust chopping duty to two people. Next was Kirito, who tilted his head while wondering aloud why those ancestors chose to build the village here in the first place. The chief lost his words for a moment before going into a fiery rage, and hit Kirito's and even Eugeo's heads with his fist.

It had been a year and three months since then that the two continued taking turns with the Dragon Bone Axe and challenging Gigas Cedar. However, most likely due to their immature arms, their axe swing couldn't make a deep cut into the tree trunk. The cut in the tree up until now was the result of the three hundred years of work, so it was natural that the hard work from the two young boys wouldn't make much difference, they couldn't feel any accomplishment from their work as a result.

No —— their mood, not only could it be seen, their clear form of depression seemed like it could be verified in reality too.

Kirito, standing beside Eugeo while staring wordlessly at Gigas Cedar, seemed to be thinking the same thing, then he briskly walked toward the trunk while stretching his left hand.

"Oi Kirito, don't do it. The chief said not to peep excessively at the «Life» of the great tree, didn't he?"

Eugeo hastily called out, but Kirito just glanced toward him while his usual mischievous smile floated on the edge of his mouth.

"The last time we looked was two months ago, it's no longer excessively, just occasionally."

"Always like this huh, it can't be helped then. ……Oi, wait for me, let me look too."

Eugeo whose body finally calmed down got up using the same movement Kirito did earlier and rushed to his partner's side.

"Ready? Opening now."

Kirito said in low voice, with his left hand out front, the index finger and middle finger stretched out tightly while the remaining fingers held close. A shape which looked like a creeping snake was drawn in the air before them. It was the most basic devoted symbol of the god of creation.

After slicing the symbol with his fingertip, Kirito immediately hit Gigas Cedar's trunk. It didn't make the dry striking sound it should have, but a clear sound as if it was from playing with silverware resounded softly. Then a small squared light window emerged out of the trunk.

Everything in the universe, regardless of whether it was able to move or not, had its existence governed by the god of creation Stacia in the form of «Life». Insects and flowers had a little, cats and horses had much more, and humans were given even more life than those. Then the trees in the forest and moss covered stones had many times more «Life» than humans. In all its forms, life had one similarity: it increased after being born, and once it reached the peak, continued to decrease. When life was completely depleted, animals or humans stopped breathing, the plants withered, and the rocks broke down.

«Stacia Window» was where the sacred text of the remaining Life was inscribed. It could be called out when a person with proper sacred power cut the symbol, then struck the target. While most could pull out the window of pebbles or grass, it was somewhat difficult to do so on animals, and for humans, it was not possible to pull the window out without sufficient knowledge in the sacred arts first. ——On the other hand, it was a little scary to look at one's own window anyway.

In general, the window of trees were easier to look at than humans, but the degree of difficulty of the evil tree Gigas Cedar was as high as expected: Eugeo and Kirito only became able to call out the window about half a year ago.

There was a story that once, at the «World Central Axiom Church» in the capital city Centoria, the elder master of the sacred arts succeeded in pulling out the window of the earth god Terraria after a continuous ritual for

seven days and seven nights. However, once the elder master looked at the earth's Life, he became depressed, lost his sanity and later disappeared.

Upon hearing that story, Eugeo became a little scared not only to look at his own, but also the windows of large things like Gigas Cedar, but Kirito appeared not to care. This time as well, he put his excited face close to the floating shiny window. While Eugeo thought he sometimes couldn't understand his childhood best friend, he lost to his curiosity, and looked into that surface.

The pale purple square window had figures written in a combination of straight and curved lines. Those were the ancient sacred letters, if it were only reading a few figures, Eugeo was able to do it, only writing them was strictly prohibited.

"Well……"

Eugeo used his finger to confirm it one by one while saying the figures,

"235,542."

"Ah– ……what was it months ago?"

"Probably…… 235,590."

"……"

On hearing Eugeo's reply, Kirito lifted his hands in an exaggerated manner, collapsed with his knees hitting the ground, then messed his black hair using his fingers.

"Just fifty! We worked hard for two months and only managed fifty out of 235 thousands! At this rate we wouldn't cut it down within our whole life!"

"No, that wasn't possible in the first place."

Eugeo couldn't do anything but answer with a bitter smile,

"The six generations of woodcutters before us worked hard for three hundred years, and the result was not even one-quarter…… To make it simple, hmm, it would take about eighteen generations, or nine hundred years more."

"Y-o-u~~"

Kirito, who was crouching with his head in his arms, looked up to Eugeo, then suddenly grabbed Eugeo's legs. Eugeo lost his balance due to the sudden attack, and collapsed onto the moss bed on his back.

"What's with that honor student attitude! At least act more troubled with this unreasonable duty!"

Even though he said that as if he was angry, a grin floated on Kirito's face while he rode Eugeo and messed up his hair.

"Uwa–, why you!"

Eugeo's hands grabbed Kirito's wrists and pulled hard. He then utilized the moment Kirito stiffened his body to resist, rolled vertically in a half circle, so now he was on top.

"Now, payback time!"

While shouting and laughing, he pulled Kirito's hair with his dirty hands, but unlike Eugeo's soft light brown hair, Kirito's pointed black hair rendered his attack meaningless. Eugeo then switched to tickling Kirito's flank.

"Ugya, you…… that's, h-hahah……"

Kirito was running short of breath as he struggled against being held down and tickled, when suddenly a high voice came from behind them.

"You two——! Slacking off again!!"

At that moment, the fight between Eugeo and Kirito came to a complete halt.

"Uu……"

"This is bad……"

Both of them shrugged then fearfully turned around.

On the rock a little bit away from them, with both hands on her hips, a human figure with her chest protruding forward. Eugeo pulled out slightly, then spoke with a smile,

"H……Hey Alice, you're pretty early today."

"Not early at all, just the usual time."

The figure made an unfriendly face, the long hair tied on both sides of her head shining with a golden light under the sunlight filtered through the foliage. The young girl jumped off the rock nimbly. She wore a bright blue skirt with a white pinafore, and held a wicker basket in her right hand.

The young girl's name was Alice Schuberg. Daughter of the village chief, and she was of the same age as Eugeo and Kirito, eleven years old.

For all children living in Rulid —— no, in the northern region, it was a tradition that they would be given their «Sacred Task» and become apprentices in the spring of their eleventh year; however, Alice was the only exception, she went to school at the church instead. She was given private lessons from Sister Azariya in order to extend her talents in the sacred arts further as the best child in the village.

However, Rulid wasn't wealthy enough to let the village chief's eleven-year-old daughter merely study all day long, no matter how much talent she had. Everyone who could work must work, they had to continue repelling the constant attacks from drought, long period of rain, pests; all of which could shave off the Life of the crops and livestock —— in other words, from the «God of Darkness Vector's Prank». It was only when the harsh winter arrived that all the villagers could finally be at peace.

Eugeo's house had wheat fields in a wide cultivated land to the south of the village, his father Orick and his ancestors were farmers. After knowing Eugeo, one of his three sons, was chosen for the chopping mission his mouth was filled with words of delight, but in part of his mind he surely held some disappointment. Of course they would receive the payment for the chopping mission from the village vault, but the fact that there was one less hand to help in the field wouldn't change.

In practice, the eldest son of each house would be given the same Sacred Task as their father: in the case of a farmer's household, their daughter, next son, and the third son would also follow this standard. Children of the

tool shop's owner would continue working in the tool shop, a guard's child would become a guard, and the village chief's child would succeed them as the next chief too. Rulid village had maintained this custom with almost no change for a few hundred years, the adults said that it was the gift of divine protection from Stacia, but Eugeo could faintly remember the incompatibilities in their story.

Why, if the adults thought about expanding the village, why was there not a single change until now? He still couldn't understand. If they really wanted to expand the fields, they could just take a little detour and leave the troublesome tree alone to be able to open up the southern forest further away. However, the chief, who was the wisest man, didn't have the faintest urge to review those old traditions.

Therefore, no matter how much time passed, Rulid village was still poor, so the chief's daughter Alice could only study in the morning as it was necessary that she had to tend to the livestock and clean the house in the afternoon. Her first task after studying was to bring lunch to Eugeo and Kirito.

With the wicker basket hanging on her right arm, Alice nimbly jumped down from the big rock. As she was on the verge of letting the next round of thunder fall off her small lips, Eugeo quickly got up while shaking his head.

"We didn't slack off, really! We already finished our morning job."

Alongside Eugeo's quick excuse, Kirito, behind him, reacted accordingly with "Yeah yeah."

Alice's pupils emitted a strong light to the two again, then her cheeks softened.

"If you have enough energy to fight after finishing, I wonder if I should ask Garitta-san to increase the workload for you two?"

"A-Anything but that!"

"Just kidding. ——Well, let's quickly have lunch. Today is so hot, if we don't eat it soon, it'll go bad."

Alice then put the wicker basket on the ground, took a large sized cloth from inside, and spread it out. She selected a flat area and laid the cloth down, on which Kirito quickly took off his shoes and jumped over to sit on

it. Eugeo sat down after him, then the food was lined up one by one in front of the two hungry workmen.

Today's menu was salted meat and baked bean stuffed pie, black bread cheese sandwiches and sliced smoked meat, several kinds of dried fruit, and milk squeezed in the morning. Even though the food aside from the milk could be well preserved, the intense sunlight of the seventh month could still rob «Life» away from the food without mercy.

Alice told Kirito and Eugeo, who were nearly diving into the food, to 'hold on', as if she was commanding dogs, then quickly sliced the symbol in the air and confirmed the «Window» of each food starting with the bisque jar of milk.

"Uwa, the milk has ten minutes remaining, the pies have barely fifteen minutes. And I even ran here…… well, then we'll just have to eat quickly. But make sure to chew it properly too."

When the Life of the food was exhausted, it became so-called «Rotten Food», of which even a single bite would cause terrible symptoms such as stomach ache to those without a very strong stomach. Eugeo and Kirito were already irritated enough and started biting the big sliced pie without saying a word.

The three of them continued chewing their food without talking. It was obvious with the two hungry young boys, but Alice also made one wonder where she put all the food she ate with her slender abdomen. The food was cleared up one by one. First was the three slices of pie, followed by nine slices of black bread, then the jar of milk was depleted, after that, the three of them breathed a sigh of relief.

"——How did it taste?"

It was Eugeo who answered Alice's question in his serious tone, as she cast a side glance toward them.

"Yeah, today's pies are good. Your skills sure have improved, Alice."

"I-Is that so? I still feel there was something missing in the taste though."

Embarrassed, Alice said while facing sideways, Eugeo exchanged a wink with Kirito before smiling. Their boxed lunch had been made by Alice since last month, but even as it was declared so, the difference between the food made with help from her mother, Sadina-obasan, and without was obvious.

They understood that techniques couldn't be acquired without practicing for a long time, and that applied to everything —— however, Eugeo and Kirito also understood that it was better not to let it out of their mouth.

"Anyway——"

Kirito said while pinching a yellow marigo from the dried fruit bottle.

"With the trouble it takes to make delicious boxed lunch, I want to eat it at a slower pace. I wonder why the heat has to make the food go bad……"

"Why? Hmmm……"

This time, without hiding his bitter smile, Eugeo shrugged in an exaggerated manner.

"You said a weird thing huh? Summer making Life go down faster is just how things work. Be it meat, fish, vegetables and fruits, they become bad immediately if you leave them alone, right?"

"I know that, I asked why, didn't I? During winter, even if you left raw salted meat outside for many days, it still wouldn't go bad, would it?"

"That's…… because winter is cold."

Kirito bent his lips like an unreasonable child at Eugeo's answer. His black pupils, which were unusual in the northern region, shone with the light of disobedience.

"That's right, it's just as Eugeo said, the cold will make the food last longer. Not just in the winter. If it's cold, even during this season, we could still keep the food for a long time."

This time Eugeo was dumbfounded. He lightly kicked Kirito's shin with his toe.

"Don't say it like it's easy. Cold? Summer is hot, that's why it's summer. Are you thinking about using the absolutely taboo weather control art to call snow down? The next day the Integrity Knights from the capital would fly here to get you."

"Y-Yeah…… Nothing we can do……? I feel like there is a way, some easy way……"

While Kirito muttered that with his frowning face, Alice who was quietly listening to their conversation while using her finger to curl the tip of her pigtail hair up until now said,

"It's interesting."

"W-What do you mean, Alice?"

"No, not about using the banned art. It doesn't need to be at a scale enough to cover the entire village, but just small enough to be able to put into this boxed lunch basket is good enough, isn't it?"

On hearing what she said as if it was perfectly normal, Eugeo unintentionally turned to Kirito, who was nodding. A smile floated on Alice's face before she continued,

"There're a few things which are cold even in summer. Like water from the deep well, or the leaves of Silve. If we put those in the basket, wouldn't it become cold inside?"

"Ah…… that's true."

Eugeo folded his arms and thought.

At the center of the open space in front of the church, there was a fearfully deep well which had been dug when Rulid village was founded: the water drawn from it was so cold that it could make hands go numb even in summer. Also, in the northern forest, there were some Silve trees growing: their leaves were cold and released a pungent aroma when squeezed, they were very useful as treatment for bruises. Probably having a jar of water from the deep well, or wrapping the pie with Silve leaves would make it possible to keep the boxed lunch cold while carrying it between places.

However, Kirito, who'd also paused to think, slowly shook his head and said,

"Just that, I think it won't work. The well water becomes lukewarm just a minute after it is drawn, Silve leaves might keep its coolness longer, but I don't think it could keep the insides of the basket cold long enough to cover the distance from Alice's house to Gigas Cedar."

"So, do you have any other methods?"

Alice, whose good idea was shot down, asked while pouting. Kirito scratched his black hair in silence for a while, then suddenly said in a low voice,

"Ice. With a lot of ice, it'd be more than enough to keep the boxed lunch cold."

"Oh you……"

Alice shook her head in amazement.

"It's summer now. Where exactly can you find ice? Even the grand market in the capital won't have it!"

She said in a tone like a mother scolding her unreasonable child.

Eugeo, on the other hand, could recall the bad feeling, as he had seen Kirito making this tight-lipped face before. This childhood friend, when such a light floated in his eyes, when he spoke in such a tone, Eugeo knew from experience that Kirito was thinking about something up to no good. Inside his head, he recalled when Kirito took the honey of the emperor bee to the eastern mountain, or when he broke the jar of milk which had expired a hundred years ago in the church's cellar, those scenes floated and disappeared in quick succession.

"W-Well, it's fine, isn't it? There's nothing wrong with eating in a hurry anyway. Also, if we don't start our afternoon work soon we'll be late going back."

Eugeo said while quickly moving the empty plates back to the wicker basket, as he wanted to break off this disturbing topic. However, when he looked at Kirito's pupils which were shining brilliantly, as if he had some idea, he inevitably realized that his fear had already become reality.

"……What is it, what plan do you have this time?"

His question was mixed with resignation, Kirito smiled before answering,

"Hey…… Looong ago, Eugeo's grandfather told us a story, remember?"

"Hmm……?"

"Which story……?"

Aside from Eugeo, Alice also tilted her head slightly.

Before Stacia summoned Eugeo's grandfather to her side two years ago, a lot of legends were packed behind that white beard of his. While sitting in the rocking chair in the garden, he always told stories to the three children sitting near his legs. Strange stories, exciting stories, scary stories: there were hundreds of those stories, so Eugeo didn't know which story Kirito was referring to. Then his black haired childhood friend coughed while raising his index finger, before saying,

"Summer Ice, it's nothing but that, right?『Bercouli and the Northern White……』"

"Oi, stop it, you're joking, right?"

Eugeo interrupted without listening to the end while swinging his head and hands violently.

Bercouli, among the ancestors who founded Rulid village, was the strongest sword user, who'd served as the first generation's guard chief. But since he'd lived three hundred years ago, there were only a few remaining tales of his bravery, and the story Kirito mentioned was one of the most bizarre among them.

On a certain day during the peak of summer, Bercouli noticed a big clear rock floating in the river to the east of the village. Upon picking it up, it turned out to be a lump of ice. Bercouli, in his amazement, walked upstream along the river. Before long, he arrived at the end of the world, the «Mountain range at the Edge», and as he kept following the narrow river, he faced a huge cave opening.

Bercouli stepped into the cave against the blowing freezing wind, and after he overcame various dangers, arrived at the largest hall. What he saw there was a huge white dragon, which was said to protect the Human World's boundary. The figure of the dragon, its body curled over an incalculable amount of assorted treasures, made Bercouli realize it was sleeping, but even with his courage, he still approached it on tiptoe. Among the treasure, he discovered a beautiful long sword, and he really wanted to own it no matter what. He softly took the sword without waking the dragon up, and ran away as fast as he could —— that was the plot summary. The title was『Bercouli and the Northern White Dragon』.

Even for the mischievous Kirito, surely he wouldn't be thinking about breaking the village's rules to go beyond the Northern pass and searching for the real dragon, would he? While half praying, Eugeo fearfully asked,

"You mean, we'll watch Ruhr river and wait for an ice block to float down…… is that right?"

However, Kirito snorted before simply saying,

"Waiting like that, the summer will just end before we can get anything. I don't want to imitate Bercouli and go find the dragon. In that story, it mentioned the icicles at the entrance of the cave, right? Just two or three of those would be enough for testing on the boxed lunch."

"You, like I said……"

Eugeo became speechless for several seconds, then he turned to his side, looking for Alice to substitute him in objecting this reckless boy's ideas. Then he noticed that her blue pupils were shining with a brilliant light, he dropped his shoulders in his mind.

Eugeo and Kirito were the number one brat duo of the village, they made elderly people sigh and scold the duo on a daily basis. However, only few knew that their many misdeeds were secretly aided and abetted from behind by Alice, the village's number one honor student.

That Alice currently had her right index finger at her lips, as she remained silent for several seconds, suddenly blinked and declared,

"——That's not a bad idea."

"N-Not you too, Alice……"

"Certainly, only children were prohibited from going beyond the Northern pass. Try to recall properly. The exact sentence of the rule said, [Without adult supervision, children must not go play beyond the Northern pass.]"

Eugeo and Kirito unintentionally exchanged glances.

The village's rules or «Rulid Villager's Standards» as its formal name was the old writing half in paper and half in leather, its two cen thickness was kept inside the village chief's residence. It was the first thing all children who went to church school had to memorize. And after that, after having to hear their parents and the elderly keep saying 'In the rules', 'According to the rules', the rules were ingrained in their heads by the time they turned eleven —— was what they thought, however, it seems that Alice accurately remembered all of the text, word for word.

……No way, don't tell me even the empire's fundamental law which is two times thicker has also…… no, even perfectly memorizing the village rules is already……

While Eugeo's glance was filled with such thoughts, Alice cleared her throat once, then continued in a teacher-like tone,

"Isn't it right? We aren't going there to play, that's forbidden by the rules. But searching for an icicle isn't playing. Prolonging the Life of the boxed lunch isn't just for us, it also helps people who work on the fields and pastures, right? So this can be interpreted as a part of work too."

After the flowing speech, Eugeo exchanged glance with Kirito again. Although his partner's black pupils initially seemed to have some slight hesitation, but it was immediately melted away like an ice block floating in a river in summer——

"Yeah, that's right, absolutely right."

While folding his arms, Kirito nodded with a serious face.

"Because it's work, even if we go beyond the pass to the «Mountain range at the Edge», it still doesn't break the village's rules. Look, Balbossa-san is always saying, right? 'Work isn't just that which was ordered, if you're free then look for work!', like that. If they get angry, we can just refer to his saying, then it should be fine."

The Balbossas were a wealthy family which owned the village's largest wheat fields. The current head of the house, Nigel Balbossa was a fifty year old man who still had a good body; even though his house could harvest many times more than the rest of the village, he still wasn't satisfied, and whenever he met Eugeo on the street, he always greeted Eugeo with a sarcastic 'Still can't cut down that annoying Cedar yet?'. Rumor said that he'd asked the chief for priority to cultivate the new land once Gigas Cedar has been cut down. Eugeo's response was, 'Before that happens, your Life will be long gone,' of course he only said so in his mind.

Even though Kirito's idea to use Nigel's words as an excuse for going beyond Northern pass was attractive, but having served as the restraint of the group for so long made Eugeo unable to stop saying 'But'.

"……But, going to the Mountain range at the Edge isn't breaking just the village rules but 'that' too, right? Even if we go past the pass and arrive at the base of the mountain, we still can't enter the cave……"

Upon hearing that, Alice and Kirito made a serious face.

«That» which Eugeo said was the absolute law which governed all people of the vast Human World, its authority was far beyond the «Norlangarth North Empire Fundamental Law», let alone the «Rulid Villager's Standard» —— Its name was «Taboo Index».

It was issued by the «Axiom Church», the great tower which seemed to reach the heavens, located in capital city Centoria. The thick book which was bound in pure white leather was provided not only to the north empire that Eugeo lived in, but also at least one to every town and village in the east, south, and west empires.

The Taboo Index, unlike the village rules and the empire's laws, just as its name implied, was the list of «Things one does not attempt». It started with a wide range of taboos like «Treason against the Church» or «Murder», «Thievery», on to more mundane entries like the limit of beasts and fish to be caught each year, or food that can't be fed to the livestock; the number easily exceeded one thousand entries. For all children attending school, aside from learning to write and calculate, the most important subject was to memorize all of the Taboo Index. —— Or rather, not teaching the Index in school is considered to be breaking the Index.

Although the Taboo Index and the Axiom Church possessed such tremendous authority, but there seemed to be land it couldn't extend to. Beyond the «Mountain range at the Edge» which enclosed the world was the Land of darkness —— or «Dark Territory» in the sacred words. Therefore, traveling to the Mountain range at the Edge was already prohibited by the Index in the first place. To Eugeo, it was meaningless to only go to the base of the mountain without going into the cave.

Alice would find the way to challenge the Taboo Index like always, but thinking like that is already a great taboo in itself. Eugeo stared at his other childhood friend while thinking so.

Her long eyelashes brightened under the noon sunlight filtered through the foliage like a very fine line of golden thread, Alice sank into silence for a while —— Soon after, she suddenly lifted her face, then said with the usual disobedient light shining in her pupils,

"Eugeo. Your prohibited term is inaccurate again."

"Eh…… you're lying."

"I'm not lying. What is in the Index is like this: The first chapter, third passage, eleventh paragraph,『Not anyone is to go beyond the Mountain range enclosing the edge of Human World』……Beyond the mountain, naturally it means «Climb beyond». It doesn't include going into a cave. Also, our objective isn't to go beyond the mountain range, but to obtain ice, right? There is no『Do not search for ice in the Mountain range at the Edge』written in the Taboo Index at all."

To the words gushing smoothly out in Alice's sweet and clear voice like a church's smallest bell, Eugeo didn't say another word. Indeed, he felt what Alice said was somewhat correct.

——But, up until now we haven't gone to the Northern pass before, we have only followed the Ruhr river up to the twin ponds, I don't know what lies beyond that, this is the season that has many annoying bugs by the waterside too……

While Eugeo was still stubbornly thinking in circles for a way to retreat, Kirito slapped his back —— with a force not enough to reduce his Life —— before exclaiming,

"Look, Eugeo, if Alice, who studies the most in the village, says so, then there is no doubt about it! Alright, then it's decided, on the next rest day we'll go search for the white dra…… erm, I mean, search for the cave of ice!"

"Then it's better if the boxed lunch is made using the ingredients which lasts a bit longer."

Looking at the bright faces of his both childhood friends, Eugeo sighed within his mind before responding "Yeah," weakly.

Part 2

Apparently, the weather was good on the third rest day of the seventh month.

Only on rest days were children above ten, who had already been given their Sacred Task, allowed to play around until dinner as they had in their childhood. Eugeo and Kirito usually spent it doing things like fishing and practicing their sword skills with other boys, however today they left their homes before the morning mist even disappeared, and waited for Alice under the old tree at the edge of the village.

"……She's slow!"

Even though he had been waiting with Eugeo for only a few minutes, Kirito grumbled,

"I can't understand why dressing has a higher priority than coming on time to girls. Maybe in two years she will be like your sister, who had her clothes dirtied in the forest and refused to wear them afterwards."

"It can't be helped, girls are like that anyway."

Having said that with a bitter smile, Eugeo then suddenly thought about what would happen in two years time.

Alice would still be a child without a Sacred Task, people around her would still tolerate her preference of being together with Eugeo and Kirito. But since she was the daughter of the village chief, it had been partially decided that she had to act as a standard model for the other girls in the village. In the not so distant future, she would be prohibited from playing with boys, and no doubt she would have to take lessons not only in the sacred arts but also in conduct.

Then…… what would happen after that? Would she have to marry into someone's house?, like Eugeo's eldest sister Sulinea, If that's the case, what would this partner think……?

"Oi, you look so absentminded. Did you sleep well last night?"

With a sudden stare from Kirito with his doubtful expression, Eugeo nodded in a hurry.

"Y-Yeah, I'm alright. ……Ah, there she comes."

Upon hearing light footsteps, he pointed in the direction of the village.

Appearing through the thick morning mist was Alice, just as Kirito had said, her finely combed golden hair was tied with a ribbon, swinging on top of her spotless pinafore. Eugeo unintentionally exchanged glances with his close friend while trying not to smile, then they turned to shout at the same time,

"You're slow!"

"You guys are just too early. Stop acting like children all the time already."

Once she finished saying that, Alice pushed the wicker basket which was in her right hand to Eugeo and the water canteen in her left to Kirito.

Both of them reflexively took the items before turning around toward the narrow road stretching from northwards. Alice bent over to pluck an ear of a grass, straightened and pointed its tip toward the standing tall rocky mountain, she then energetically exclaimed,

"Well then…… summer ice searching party, let's go!"

Why do we always end up as «The princess and the two followers»? While thinking this, Eugeo exchanged glances with Kirito again and ran after Alice who had already walked ahead.

The village had a road which ran through it from the north to the south, and while the southern side of the road had been trod firm by the traffic of humans and carriages that came and went all the time, its northern side, where almost no one lived, had a lot of tree roots and pebbles that made walking difficult. However, Alice lightly pranced through the rough road as if it was completely flat, proceeding ahead of the two as she hummed.

How to say it, she has good control over her body?, was what Eugeo thought. Several years ago Alice occasionally joined the sword practice played by the village brats, and her slim branch had hit Eugeo and Kirito countless times. That stick acted as if it could cut through the air, even if its opponent was a wind spirit. If she had kept practicing, it was possible that Alice could become the very first female guard of the village.

"Guard, huh……."

Eugeo muttered in a quiet voice.

Before the Sacred Task of cutting the great tree was given to him, perhaps it had been his dream, though it was vague and extraordinary. All the village kids yearned to be selected as a guard: instead of the ugly stick made from the bark of a living tree, they would be given real steel swords, albeit used ones, and would attend a real school of sword arts.

That wasn't all. Every fall, all the guards of every village in the northern region could participate in the sword arts tournament held in Zakkaria, to the south. If one could achieve a high ranking, they could become a sentinel —— being recognized as a real swordsman in both name and reality, and able to borrow the official sword tempered by the blacksmith workshop in the capital. However, the dream didn't end there. If they could

prove their merit among the sentinels, they could obtain qualification to take the examination for the «Master Sword Academy», which had an ancient and honorable origin. After passing a difficult examination, and graduating from the school's two years of learning, they could participate in the martial arts tournament which was held in the presence of the Norlangarth North Empire Emperor. Bercouli the legendary had been said to have won in this tournament splendidly.

Ultimately, a gathering of all true heroes from the entire Human World was held by the Axiom Church itself, the «Four Empires Unity Tournament». Only the one who won the battle that even god could see clearly, the top of all swordsmen, would be bestowed the command by the god to protect the world, to fight against the demons from the Dark Territory, to be appointed the duty of a dragon rider, an «Integrity Knight»——

Until that point, it was already beyond imagination, but perhaps, there was a time when Eugeo had thought of that. Perhaps, if Alice left the village not as a swordsman but as a sacred warlock apprentice, to attend the school in Zakkaria or even the «Master Arts Academy» in the capital, at that time, by her side as the escort, with his body wrapped in a green and light brown sentinel uniform, the shining silvery official sword hung on the waist, was him……

"The dream is still not over yet."

Suddenly, a whisper came from Kirito who was walking beside him. Eugeo lifted his face in surprise. Apparently, with just the sigh he had let escape earlier, Kirito could read all the meaning behind it. His instinct was as sharp as ever. Eugeo made a wry smile and muttered in return,

"Nope, it is already over."

Yes, the time of dreaming was already over. In spring last year, the Sacred Task of guard apprentice was given to Jink, son of the current village guard chief. Even though his sword skill fell short of Eugeo's and Kirito's, and of course Alice's. Eugeo continued talking in a tone mixed with slight irritation,

"Once the Sacred Task has been given, even the village chief can't change it."

"With one exception, right?"

"Exception……?"

"When the task has been accomplished."

This time he made a bitter smile at Kirito's stubbornness. This partner still wouldn't let go of his great ambition to cut down the Gigas Cedar in his generation.

"Once we cut down that tree, our work will be beautifully completed. After that we can choose our own Sacred Task, how's that?"

"That's true but……"

"I was glad I didn't get the Sacred Task to be a shepherd or farmer. Those are tasks which just don't have an end, but ours is different. I'm sure there is a way, in three…… no, two years we'll cut it down, and then……"

"We'll join the sword arts tournament in Zakkaria."

"What? Are you thinking of the same thing, Eugeo?"

"I can't let Kirito look good alone anyway."

After that talkative exchange, Eugeo had a strange feeling that it was no longer an unrealistic dream. The two walked while grinning, imagining the scene when they received the official sword, returned to the village, and made Jink and his gang's eyes widen in jealousy; Alice who was walking in front of them suddenly turned around.

"Hey you two, what are you talking about in secret?"

"N-No, it's nothing. Just wondering if it's time for lunch yet, right?"

"Y-Yeah."

"Didn't we just start walking? Also, look, we can see the river now."

When they looked toward where Alice's ear of grass pointing to, they could see the shaking water surface at the road ahead. The source of the Ruhr river was on the Mountain range at the Edge, it flowed through the east of Rulid village, then continued south to Zakkaria town. At the point the road met the river, the road branched into two, the right path crossed the north Rulid bridge into the eastern forest, the left path stretched north along the river's west bank. The direction they chose was, obviously, north.

Once Eugeo arrived at the junction, he knelt at the riverside, then submerged his right hand into the clear stream and made a rustling sound. It was indeed mid summer, the freezing water during the beginning of

spring was now quite warm. It should feel really good if he could undress and jump into the water, but he couldn't do so in front of Alice.

"This is not a temperature a block of ice could float in."

Eugeo said and turned to his side, Kirito pouted before objecting,

"That is why we're going to the big cave where the ice came from, isn't it?"

"That's all good, but we need to be back before the evening bell. Let's see…… when Solus is in the center of the sky, we should start heading back."

"It can't be helped. If that's the case then let's hurry!"

Behind Alice, who was treading on the soft undergrowth, the two quickened their pace to chase her.

The tree branches protruding from the left side acted like a canopy, blocking the sunlight, there was also cool air rising from the surface of the river to the right, those helped the three walk comfortably even though Solus had already rose high up in the sky. The road along the bank which was about a mel wide was covered in short summer grasses, there were almost no pebbles nor holes to make walking difficult.

Eugeo wondered, why is it that they had never set foot beyond the twin ponds even once, although it was so easy to walk there.

The «Northern pass» in which the village rules forbade the children to go beyond was still far from the twin ponds. So even if they went anywhere else before that point, the adults shouldn't be able to get angry, but facing going against the rules, yes —— it could be said that it was the uneasiness from the rules that made their feet unable to move when seeing the pass in front of their eyes.

Even though he and Kirito always had to listen to the complaints from the adults who were concerned about tradition, thinking about it, far from doing it, the two didn't even think about breaking rules or Taboo. Today's humble adventure would be the closest they had come near the forbidden act.

Eugeo started feeling a little anxious, he looked at Kirito and Alice walking carefree ahead of him, they were singing shepherd songs in chorus. Those two… don't they have any fear or worry?, while thinking so, Eugeo sighed dejectedly.

"Hey, wait."

He called out, the two still kept walking but turned around together.

"What is it, Eugeo?"

Alice tilted her head while asking in a slightly threatening and purposeful tone.

"We're quite far from the village now…… Aren't there dangerous beasts around here?"

"Eh–? I never heard about it though."

Alice said while glancing at him, as Kirito lightly shrugged.

"Hmm…… the donetti whose huge long claw that grandfather saw, where did he say it was?"

"It was at the black apple tree to the east, right? But it was an old story from ten years ago though."

"If it's around here, it would be the four-eared fox. Eugeo, you're such a scaredy-cat, aren't you?"

During their 'Ahaha' laugh, Eugeo hurriedly refuted,

"N-No, it's not about being scared…… We never went beyond the twin ponds before, have we? I just want us to be more careful."

Upon hearing that, Kirito's black pupils shone mischievously.

"Yeah, that's true. Did you know? During the time the village was founded, sometimes the devils from the Land of darkness…… like «Goblins» or «Orcs» would cross the mountain to steal sheep or kidnap children."

"What? Are you two trying to scare me? I know about it. In the end the Integrity Knights came from the capital and exterminated the Goblin chief."

"—— 『Since then, on a sunny day, the silvery white dragon knight could be seen far above the Mountain range at the Edge.』 "

Kirito hummed the final verse of a fairy tale that all the children in the village knew about, while turning to look up toward the north sky. Eugeo and Alice did the same, before they realized it, their vision was filled with a

pure white rocky mountain, and over it was the blue sky where they were looking for something.

For a moment, they had the feeling they saw a small light glittering among the clouds, but they couldn't see anything once they tried to focus their gaze. The three looked at each other before laughing in embarrassment.

"——It's just a fairy tale, right? The ice dragon that lived in the cave was, surely, just a story he made up sometime later too, that Bercouli."

"Oioi, if you say something like that in the village, the fist of the village chief is gonna fall on your head. The swordsman Bercouli is Rulid's hero after all."

Eugeo's words made a smile float back to everyone's faces again, and Alice hastened her stride.

"We'll know once we reach there. Look, if you're leisurely walking like that, we won't be able to reach the cave before the lunch."

——That said, Eugeo didn't think they would reach the «Mountain range at the Edge» with half a day of walking anyway.

The Mountain range at the Edge was, as its name implied, the world's edge; in other words, the border of the human country which consisted of the four empires of the north, south, east, and west; for Rulid village which located at the north most of the northern region, it wasn't a place children's feet could easily reach.

So, Eugeo was really surprised when, just before the sun reached the center of the sky, the Ruhr river, which had narrowed considerably, disappeared into the cave entrance which opened its mouth at the base of the steep cliff.

The deep forest which spread on both sides abruptly ended, in front of his eyes was the steep gray rugged cliff stretching upward. If he looked up, he could hazily see where the blue sky crossed the pure white mountain ridge in the distance, this rock slope was without doubt, the edge of the mountain range.

"We've already arrived……? This is, the Mountain range at the Edge…… right? Isn't it a bit too soon……?"

Kirito, who appeared not to believe it either, said in a faint voice. It was the same with Alice, who whispered while her blue irises were still wide,

"Then…… where is the «Northern pass»? Did we pass through it unknowingly?"

It's just as she said. It's possible that the village's children —— or maybe even adults have been passing through the pass without even knowing it. Thinking about it, about thirty minutes walk from the twin ponds, there was a place which had quite a bit of ups and downs, could that place be the Northern pass?

While Eugeo was looking around with his doubts, the unusually serious tone of Alice's whisper reached his ears.

"If this is the Mountain range at the Edge…… then on the other side is the Land of darkness, right? If so…… we have been walking for just four hours, the same amount of time won't even get us to Zakkaria. Rulid is…… really, at the border of the world……"

Eugeo stood there in confusion, We lived in the villages for so long but didn't know where it's located in the world? No —— could it be that even the adults didn't know that the Mountain range at the Edge is this close? In the three hundred years of history, the one who came out of the wide forest spreading to the north of the village, aside from Bercouli, was us……?

Somehow…… it's strange. Eugeo thought. However, he didn't know why it was strange.

Everyday, at the same time, the adults eat breakfast like the day before, go to work in the fields or pastures, smithing or spinning workshops like the day before. What Alice said earlier, that four hours was not enough to reach Zakkaria, of course, all three of them had never been to Zakkaria before, I heard from the adults that it took over two days walking along the southern main road to reach the town. However, how many of those adults actually went to Zakkaria and came back……?

The maelstrom of depressing questions which manifested in Eugeo's mind, was blown away by Alice's voice,

"——Anyway, there's nothing but to go inside after we've come this far. But before that, let's have lunch first."

With that said, she pulled the wicker basket from Eugeo's hand, then lowered her waist on the short undergrowth where it changed to gray gravel. "That's what I'm waiting for, my belly is starving." With an encouraging voice from Kirito, Eugeo also sat down on the grass. The fragrant smell of the pie blew away his remaining doubts, all that he could remember was his stomach had started complaining in hunger.

Alice fought off the stretching hands of Eugeo and Kirito by slapping them while drawing the windows of each food in succession. After she had affirmed that all of them still had their surplus time remaining, she handed out the fish and bean stuffed pies, apple and walnut stuffed pies, and dried peaches. In addition, she poured Siral water packed in the water bag into wooden cups, this also has been confirmed not to have gone bad yet.

As soon as she allowed them, Kirito who was irritated enough not to say a word as he started biting the fish pie, then said in a muffled voice while still chewing,

"That cave…… if we find a lot of ice, then we won't have to hurry to eat tomorrow's lunch."

Swallowing his food, Eugeo turned to face him and answered,

"But thinking about it, even if we successfully get the ice, how do we maintain its Life in the first place? If it all melts before tomorrow's lunch then there is no point to it, right?"

"Mu……"

'I didn't think about that,' Kirito's shoulders drooped, then Alice said with an unconcerned face,

"If we bring it back in a hurry and keep it in my house's cellar, just a night wouldn't be a problem at all. You two, you should have thought just this from the beginning."

After they had their usual thoughtlessness pointed out, Eugeo and Kirito tried to hide their embarrassment by greedily stuffing their mouths with food. Even though they had enough time, Alice still ate at her usual fast pace before drinking Siral water.

After folding and fitting the white cloth neatly into the empty wicker basket, Alice stood up. She then walked to the nearby stream with three cups in her hands, and washed them quickly in the river.

"Uhyaa."

She raised an odd voice while finishing her work, and when she came back, Alice widened her hands, which were wiped dry using her pinafore, toward Eugeo.

"The water in the river is so cold! It's like the well water in mid winter."

What he saw were her small palms which had turned completely red. Unintentionally, he stretched his hands and wrapped it around Alice's, certainly to exchange the warmth from his hands with the cold in hers.

"Wait…… stop it."

Her small cheeks turned to the same color as her palms, and Alice pulled her hands back. At that time, Eugeo finally realized that he had done something his usual self would never do, and shook his head in a hurry.

"Ah…… no, that's…"

"Well, shouldn't we be heading off now, sir and madam?"

'Did you intend to help me out of that situation?' Eugeo was grinning while saying that and lightly kicked Kirito's leg, and after his rude action, he lifted the water bag to his shoulder, and walked into the cave without looking back.

It was hard to believe that the source of the Ruhr river, the clear stream that the three had been following up until this point, would really be this small. With a diameter of about one and a half mels, the small river overflowed from the cave opening on a high cliff; to its left side, there was a bare rock about the same size stretched out, he stepped on it and walked into the cave.

Eugeo was thinking, Bercouli had stepped on this rock three hundred years ago, as he tried his best to proceed into the cave's interior. Suddenly the surrounding temperature dropped, he rubbed his arms which extended from the short-sleeved tunic.

He proceeded for about ten steps while affirming the two footsteps from behind following him.

At that point, Eugeo realized he made a major mistake, he dropped his shoulders and looked back.

"Oh no…… I didn't bring a lamp. Kirito, did you bring one?"

Even though he was only about five mels from the entrance, the ambience was dark enough that he was no longer able to distinguish the expressions of the two. In the complete darkness inside the cave, it was very natural to entrust his hope to his partner to deal with stuff he himself had forgotten, but the response was, "How could I realize something that you also didn't realize?" in a tone full of strange confidence.

"R…… Really, you two……"

While Eugeo was thinking how many times he had heard that amazed voice today, he looked toward the faintly shining golden hair. Alice looked at her sides a few times before thrusting her hand into her pinafore pocket and pulled something thin and long out. It was the ear of grass she had picked up when they started their adventure.

She held the grass in her right hand, with her left palm supporting its tip, Alice closed her eyes. Her small lips moved, a strange ritual verse in sacred words that Eugeo didn't know started playing in the air.

Finally her left hand quickly sliced the complex symbol, a pale soft light lit at the swelled round tip of the ear. The light then increased its intensity immediately, and kept the darkness of the cave away at the considerably distance.

"Ooo."

"Wow……"

Kirito and Eugeo unintentionally let out sounds of amazement at the same time.

Even though they already knew Alice had been studying the sacred arts, they almost never had a chance to see it with their eyes. According to Sister Azariya's teachings, all the rituals which had their sources of power from the god of life Stacia, the sun god Solus or the earth god Terraria —— except the dark arts which were used by the servants of the god of darkness Vector —— existed to protect the order and tranquility of the world, so they should not be used indiscriminately.

The sacred arts were used by the Sister and her pupil only when the medicinal plants in the village were unable to cure the sick or injured. As

Eugeo understood this well, he turned to Alice, who held the ear of grass lit in a strange color, and inadvertently asked,

"Ah, Alice…… using the arts like that, is that alright? Wouldn't you get punished for it……?"

"Hmph, if just this much would get me punished, I would have been hit by lightning ten times already."

"……"

After saying that, Alice thrust the shining grass in her right hand toward Eugeo with a smile. He received it without thinking before 'Hiee', and realized,

"I-I'm first!?"

"Of course, or would you let the weak girl walk in front? Eugeo is in front of me, Kirito is behind. Don't waste anymore time, let's hurry up and move."

"Y-Yes."

As if he was pushed by momentum, Eugeo raised the small torch and fearfully proceeded into the cave.

The winding flat shelf of rock seemed to steadily continue extending. The walls were illuminated in a bluish grey as if they were wet. Occasionally, he was worried by the small rustling movements in the dim part where the light didn't reach. However, no matter where he focused his eyes, he couldn't find anything resembling ice at all. While there were pointed grey things which looked like icicles hanging on the ceiling, he knew they were rock just at a glance.

After walking for several more minutes, Eugeo called out to Kirito behind him,

"Hey…… certainly, you said there should be icicles once we entered the cave, right?"

"I said? Something like that."

"You said!"

As he approached his partner who averted his eyes feigning ignorance, Alice used her right hand to stop Eugeo and quickly whispered,

"Hey, bring the light a bit closer."

"……?"

Eugeo brought the ear of grass near Alice's face. She rounded her lips before blowing a deep breath toward the light.

"Ah……"

"Look, you see it right? Our breath turns white, like in winter."

"Wow, really. And I have been thinking that it has been cold for a while now……"

Ignoring Kirito's complaint, Eugeo nodded alongside Alice.

"Even though it is summer outside, it's winter inside this cave. Surely there is ice here."

"Yeah, let's check a bit further."

Eugeo turned his body, he had the feeling that the cave interior was getting wider little by little as they went deeper, he returned to his cautious movements while advancing.

What they heard, aside from the faint sound of their leather boots rubbing the rock, was only the sound from the flowing stream of groundwater. Even though they had approached its source, the flow hadn't weakened at all.

"……If we had a boat, going back would be quite easy."

To Kirito who carefreely said that from behind, Eugeo rebuked him with "Don't talk so loudly." As they had already entered further than they had planned, of course, what came to his mind was——

"——Hey, if the white dragon really comes out, what should we do?"

Alice whispered as if she could read Eugeo's mind.

"Of course…… what else, but to run aw……"

The answer to the whispered question was overlapped by Kirito's reckless voice,

"It's-al-right. The white dragon chased Bercouli because he stole its treasured sword, didn't he? It sure wouldn't mind us taking icicles. ——Hmm, but if possible I'd want to peel a scale from it though……"

"Oi, what are you thinking about, Kirito?"

"That is, if we go back with a proof that we have seen the real dragon, Jink and his gang would die from jealousy."

"Don't joke! I'll tell you now, if you get chased by a dragon, we will just leave you and run away."

"Oi, your voice is too loud, Eugeo."

"That's because Kirito said something strange……"

Suddenly his foot made an odd noise, and Eugeo stopped talking. Parin, it was the sound of something breaking under his foot. He put the light in his right hand closer to his right foot in a hurry before unintentionally letting leak his voice.

"Ah, look at this."

Alice and Kirito bent down to look, Eugeo moved his toe off the spot. The water accumulated on the rock had turned into a thin ice spreading over its smooth grey surface. He stretched his fingers to pick up a piece of the thin transparent sheet.

After putting it in his palm for a few seconds, it melted into water droplets, the three looked at each other and inadvertently smiled.

"This is ice, no doubt about it. There is sure to be a lot more up ahead."

Eugeo said while illuminating his surroundings, a great deal of blue light bounced off the similarly frozen water. And it sank into the pitch black darkness of the cave, deep within……

"Ah…… somehow, there's a lot of light there."

It was just as Alice said, Eugeo moved his right hand, from the countless spots of light, he could see them flicker and blink palely. As he had completely forgotten about the white dragon, he half trotted in that direction.

Based on the time they took, it seemed they had proceeded about a hundred mel deeper. Suddenly, the left and right walls ended.

At the same time, a breathtakingly fantastic scene appeared before their eyes.

Wide. It was hard to believe they were in an underground cave, as it was an extraordinary huge open space. Its size was certainly a few times larger than the village square in front of the church.

The curved wall, which almost surrounded the entire environment, no longer looked like the wet grey wall they saw until now, but was covered in a transparent, thick, light blue layer. Then, after looking at the floor's surface, Eugeo understood, I see, so this is the source of the Ruhr river., it was a huge pond —— no, a lake would be more suitable. However, the water's surface didn't shake in the slightest. It was frozen firmly all the way, from the bank to the middle.

Among the trail of white haze over the lake, strangely shaped columns protruded out, their height easily exceeded the height of the three children. They were angular hexagonal columns ending in a tapered tip. It was like the crystal of raw ore that Garitta-jiisan showed Eugeo before. However, these were much bigger, and far more beautiful. The numerous transparent thick blue columns absorbed the sacred light from the ear of grass Eugeo was holding, before releasing it in six directions, which were also reflected further, illuminating the entire vast dome. The numbers of the columns increased as it approached the center of the lake, and became fully obstructed at the very center.

It was ice. The surrounding wall, the lake below the feet, the strange hexagonal columns, everything was made out of ice. The blue wall stretched up vertically, and closed up together at a far height, looked like a chapel's dome.

The three forgot the cold which pierced their skin, stood still for several minutes while exhaling misty breath. Before long, Alice faintly said in a trembling voice,

"……With this much ice, we could cool the food of the entire village."

"Or rather, it could even turn the village into mid winter for a while. ——Well, let's go check inside."

As soon as Kirito spoke, he advanced several steps before putting his foot on the ice lake. He gradually put his body weight on it, and eventually stepped on it with both feet, there was not a sound of the thick ice cracking.

He's always like this. Even though Eugeo had the duty to object to his partner's recklessness, this time his curiosity was superior. But if there really is a white dragon inside, I still want to peek at it no matter what.

Holding the sacred light higher, Eugeo and Alice chased after Kirito. Cautiously avoiding making loud footsteps, they moved from one shadow of the huge icicle to another with the center of the lake as their destination.

——This is great, if we see the real dragon, this time a story about us would continue for many hundred of years, wouldn't it? And if, just if, we could do what Bercouli couldn't…… by bringing anything from the dragon's treasure hoard back with us, wouldn't the village chief reconsider our Sacred Task……?

"Mugu."

As Eugeo was expanding his day dreaming while still walking, his nose bumped into the back of Kirito's head, who had suddenly stopped; with his face in a frown,

"Oi Kirito, don't suddenly stop like that."

However, there was no reply from his partner. Instead, a low groan came out,

"……What's that……"

"Eh……?"

"Just exactly what is that!"

Eugeo tilted his head at the same time as Alice beside him, and looked forward from Kirito's side.

"Just what are you talking abo……"

Alice, who saw the same thing as Eugeo couldn't finish her words.

It was a mountain of bones.

All of them were bones made out of blue ice. They shone rigidly as if they were crystal sculptures. Every single one of them was big, the various shape of bones stacked on top of each other, made a mountain higher than the height of the three children. On top of it, was a huge lump which told them who this grave belonged to.

A skull, Eugeo could understand with just a glance. Its empty eye sockets, elongated nostrils. The horns stretched out from the back, the countless number of sword-like fangs lined up on the overhung jawbone.

"The white dragon's…… bones?"

Alice whispered in a low voice.

"It's already dead……?"

"Ah…… But, its death is not due to natural causes."

The answer came from Kirito who had regained his composure, Eugeo rarely saw his partner like this, as Kirito was always painted by various other emotions.

Kirito moved a few more steps, from his feet, he picked up a huge talon which seemed to have come from the dragon's front feet.

"Look…… there are a lot of wounds here, the tip was also neatly cut off."

"It fought against something……? But, a living thing which could kill a dragon……"

The same question Alice asked floated in Eugeo's mind. Speaking of the «Northern White Dragon», it's the one that lived in various places at the Mountain range at the Edge, which encloses the entire world, protecting the Human World from the forces of darkness, it's the world's strongest protector. What kind of living thing could kill something like that……?

"Fighting with animals or other dragons shouldn't give these kind of wounds."

Kirito said while stroking his thumb over the blue talon.

"Eh……? Then, what……"

"These are the sword wounds. What killed this dragon was —— human."

"B-But…… well, even Bercouli, the hero who won the tournament in the capital still couldn't do it and had to run away. It's absurd, even the swordsmen from everywhere……"

Speaking until that point, Alice seemed to notice something and sank into silence. A moment of silence fell onto the ice lake which was now turned into a huge tomb.

A few seconds later, a whisper filled with fear flowed from her small lips,

"……The Integrity Knight……? The Integrity Knight from the Axiom Church killed the white dragon……?

Part 3

An Integrity Knight, the ultimate embodiment of law and order, and also the symbol of goodness, killed the white dragon, which was also the protector of the Human World. That kind of story was, in the eleven years that Eugeo had lived, never thought of, so he didn't think he could accept it easily. After suffering from the question he couldn't swallow or chew for a while, he sent a glance beside him, requesting an answer from his partner.

"……I don't understand."

However, Kirito's mutter was also painted in great confusion.

"Maybe…… it's possible that the Land of darkness also has a very strong knight, and that knight killed the white dragon…… But, if that's true, it's odd that until now there's not even once that the forces of darkness had crossed past the Mountain range at the Edge. ——At least, this isn't the act of a thief though……"

After he finished speaking, Kirito stepped toward the dragon's remains and gently put the talon back on the mountain of bones. Next, he dragged something long out of the bottom of the bone mountain.

"Uo…… so absurdly heavy……"

He showed it to Eugeo and Alice after he staggered as he dragged it for about a mel.

It was a long sword, with a silver grip and a scabbard made of white leather. Its rain guard was decorated by an inlaid delicate blue rose, with just a glance, they understood that it had a much higher value than any sword in the village.

"Ah…… this, probably……"

Alice said as she looked at it, Kirito nodded to her,

"Yeah. The «Blue Rose Sword» that Bercouli tried to steal from the bosom of the sleeping white dragon. I wonder why the guy who killed the dragon didn't take it……"

He bowed while talking, and lifted the grip off the ground with both of his hands, however, even with his utmost strength, he only managed to lift it up a mere ten cens off the floor.

"……Too heavy!"

Kirito separated his hands as he yelled, the long sword dropped to the ice floor again with a heavy sound. A small crack could be seen on the thick ice, the sword seemed to have an unimaginable weight despite its delicate appearance.

"……What do we do with this?"

"Can't, can't, even with the two of us together, it's not possible to bring it back to the village. Even though we deal with that woodcutting axe everyday. ……Besides, there seems to be more treasure under the bones though……"

"……Yeah, but don't think about taking anything……"

The two nodded at Alice's serious tone.

Even though taking a small trophy back and boasting to the other boys that they did it without waking the dragon would be a great adventure story, the act of taking treasure from this place was clearly grave robbery. Although the Taboo Index' regulation about «Thievery» against humans wouldn't apply to this situation, it didn't mean they could do anything they wanted as long as it wasn't prohibited.

Eugeo looked at Kirito and Alice again before nodding.

"Let's follow our plan, only taking the ice. If it's just ice, even if the dragon was still alive, it would forgive us, surely."

After he said that, Eugeo walked closer to the icicles, and kicked a small ice crystal which stretched up from the base of the big icicle like a newly grown bud. Pakin, with a good sound, he picked up the broken lump before holding it out to Alice, who opened the lid of the empty wicker basket and placed the ice inside.

The three concentrated on working to pack the ice fragments into the wicker basket without talking for a while. When the base of the icicle was cleared, they moved to the next column and repeated their actions. In just a few minutes, the big wicker basket was full of crystals which looked like transparent blue jewels.

"Yoi……sho-tto"

Alice exerted her strength to pull up the wicker basket while looking at the group of lights between her arms,

"……So beautiful. Somehow, it's such a waste to bring these back and let them all melt."

"Aren't we bringing these back to prolong our boxed lunch?"

Kirito said matter-of-factly while making a frown, Alice suddenly held out the basket to the black haired boy.

"Eh? I have to carry it all the way back too?"

"Isn't it obvious? These are too heavy for me anyway."

Trying to keep them from starting their usual bickering, Eugeo hurriedly said,

"I'll help, we can take turns to carry it. ——Well, if we don't go back now, we won't reach the village before evening. Haven't we already been in this cave for nearly an hour?"

"Ah…… as I can't see Solus, I don't know the exact time. Is there something in the sacred arts that can tell what time it is now?"

"Nope!"

Alice quickly averted her face, a small exit could be seen from one side of the wide lake of ice.

Next, looking around, on the opposite side was another exit.

Then, she drooped her shoulders before speaking,

"——Hey, which way did we come from?"

Eugeo and Kirito immediately pointed to the direction they were very confident of. Of course, they pointed at different exits.

There must be footprints - unfortunately, there was not a single depression on the smooth ice surface; the side where water from the lake flowed to must be the exit - unfortunately, it flowed out of both sides; the direction the skull was looking at was the exit - unfortunately, it didn't look at either side; after all options were exhausted in vain, finally Alice started to explain something likely to be a pointer.

"Look, isn't there a frozen puddle that Eugeo stepped on and broke? If we go closer to the exit and see it, that would be the correct one."

I see, it's as she said. As if to hide his embarrassment because he couldn't think of it himself, Eugeo coughed, before nodding.

"Alright, it's decided, let's go check on the nearer side."

"I think that way is correct though……"

While Kirito was still grumbling in reluctance, Eugeo used his left hand to push his back while holding the ear of grass in his right hand high, and stepped into the waterway in front of him.

When the ice columns that reflected the light had disappeared from their surroundings, what had been a reliable sacred light now felt very unreliable. The three increased their pace.

"……Hmm, we don't know the road back, just like the Berin brothers in the old tale. It'd be great if we had scattered nuts on the way in, as there are no birds to eat them anyway."

Kirito's silly talk felt somewhat feigned, So this carefree partner can feel uneasy too huh? Eugeo became slightly amused in contrast.

"What are you talking about? We don't have nuts in the first place. If you want to utilize what you have learned, how about putting your cloth at each fork we'll run into?"

"Stop it, I'll catch a cold like that."

As Kirito imitated intentional sneezing, Alice slapped his back.

"Stop talking nonsense and look at the ground carefully. If we overlook it, it'll be troublesome…… or rather……"

As she cut her speech off, she frowned before continuing,

"Hey, we have walked for a while now but still can't see the broken ice puddle…… So, it's actually the other path?"

"No, let's go a bit more…… Ah, listen."

As Kirito suddenly put his finger to his lips, Eugeo and Alice stopped talking. They listened carefully.

Certainly, there was another sound mixed in with the flow of the groundwater stream. It sounded like a melancholic whistle that raised and lowered in pitch.

"Ah…… the sound of wind?"

Alice murmured. Certainly, Eugeo also realized it was a sound similar to the treetops playing in the wind.

"The exit is nearby! It's great we picked this path, let's hurry!"

As he called out in relief, he started jogging to resume advancing.

"Hey, you'll slip if you run in a place like this."

But even though she said so, Alice also increased her pace. Following them from behind was Kirito, who made a doubtful expression.

"But…… does summer wind sound like this? Somehow…… it sounds like cold winter wind……"

"The strong valley winds blow like that. Anyway, let's get out of here quickly."

The light in Eugeo's right hand swung violently as he approached the cave exit. My heart has already overflowed with the feeling of quickly going back to the village, to my home. I'm sure my family would be surprised once I show them the fragment of ice I got from Alice.

But, the ice will melt quickly. Maybe it'd be better if I took an old silver coin back there…… As he thought that, he saw a small light in the darkness up ahead.

"The exit!"

He shouted with a smiling face, then frowned. The light became faintly reddish. They had entered the cave just around lunch, the time they spent inside was at most an hour or a little more, it seemed they had been in the underground world longer than they realized. If Solus had already started sinking to the west, and they didn't hurriedly go back, they wouldn't reach the village in time for dinner.

Eugeo quickened his pace. The high-pitched sound of the wind echoing into the cave had already dominated the sound of the river.

"Hey Eugeo, stop for a bit! This is weird, it has just been two hours at most but……"

Alice who ran behind him raised her voice in anxiety. However, Eugeo didn't stop. I've had had enough of this adventure. Right now, I want to be home even a moment sooner——

Turning to the right, turning to the left, and turning to the right again, finally the light fully spread in his vision. The exit was just a few mels ahead. He narrowed his eyes which had been accustomed to the dark while gradually loosening his running pace, before completely stopping.

The cave ended just there.

However, in front of Eugeo's eyes wasn't the world he knew.

The whole sky was deep red. But it wasn't the color of the setting sun. First of all, Solus couldn't be found anywhere in the sky. Like the juice from the hanging mountain grapes that were too ripe —— or the sheep's blood which was thrown out, only a dull, depressing red spread across his eyes.

The ground was black. On the other side was the strangely steep mountain range which was dotted in front by strangely shaped rocky mountains, the water surface which could be seen here and there were stained in black with something reminiscent of ash. The skin of twisted dead trees was white like polished bone.

The wind, which blew violently as if to tear everything in pieces, shook the dead treetops, causing long melancholic cries. It was without a doubt, the sound of the wind they had heard inside the cave.

A place like this, a world which was forsook by gods, wasn't the Human World Eugeo lived in. Then —— what the three were looking at, this scene was——

"Dark…… Territory……"

Kirito's hoarse voice was immediately carried off by the sound of the wind.

The place where the authority of the Axiom Church couldn't extend its reach to, the land of the devil tribes serving under the god of darkness Vector, the world which they had thought only existed inside the tales told by the village elders, was just a few steps ahead. As he thought that, the center of Eugeo's head became freezing cold, he couldn't do anything but to stand still. As if having touched that information for the first time in his life, the large amount of it flew into a section of his mind which had never

been used before, he was no longer able to even handle thoughts of his own.

Inside his head, which was stained in pure white, was a single sentence written at the beginning of the Taboo Index, shining clearly and brightly. The first chapter, third passage, eleventh paragraph which should have been forgotten after talking to Alice the day before.『Not anyone is to go beyond the Mountain range enclosing the edge of the Human World』.

"No…… don't go any further……"

Eugeo recklessly moved his stiff mouth and squeezed the words out. He spread his arms as if to prevent Kirito and Alice, who were behind him, from falling.

At that time. A solid metal striking sound echoed from above, Eugeo's body trembled in surprise. He looked up at the red sky reflexively.

In the blood red background, he could see something white intertwined with something black.

As they were flying at frightening heights, they were tiny little specks. It seemed their real size would be far beyond humans. While the two flying bodies were intensely switching places, they separated before approaching each other again, the moment they blended together, an intermittent metallic sound echoed.

"The dragon knights……"

Kirito, who was looking up at the sky beside Eugeo, whispered in a husky voice.

It was as his partner said, the two fighting each other had long necks and tails, they were huge flying dragons, each with a pair of triangular wings. The body of the riders could be seen on their backs, armed with swords and shields. The one riding the white dragon was in a white silver armor, on the black dragon was a knight in jet black armor. Their swords were like that too, the beam of dazzling light from the white knight's sword was stagnated by the miasma released from the black knight's sword.

As the two dragon knights struck each other with their swords, the sound of thunderous impact reverberated, as large amount of tiny fire particles danced in the air.

"I wonder if the white one is…… the Church's Integrity Knight……"

To Alice's mutter, Kirito nodded slightly.

"Right…… The black one is the knight of the darkness' forces, I guess…… With strength on par to the Integrity Knight's."

"It can't be……"

Eugeo shook his head inadvertently.

"The Integrity Knights are the world's strongest. He can't be defeated by the likes of a knight of darkness."

"I wonder about that. From the look of it, there isn't much difference in their sword skills. Both can't penetrate the other's defense."

Immediately after Kirito said that. As if hearing his voice, the white knight pulled his dragon's bridle and gained a large gap. The black dragon flapped its wings violently to shorten the distance.

However, before the distance could be reduced, the white dragon turned its head sharply by bending its neck, along with an action which seemed to be gathering power. Immediately after that, while still swinging its neck, its jaws opened wide. A colorless flame gushed out in a straight line from between its fangs, and wrapped the black dragon knight entirely.

The roar which dominated the sound of the wind struck Eugeo's ears. The black dragon twisted its body in pain, shaking violently in mid air and descended. Without missing that chance, the Integrity Knight had replaced his sword with a reddish brown great bow and drew it to the limit, before releasing a long arrow.

The arrow drew a faint trace of flame in the mid air, without missing, it pierced through the black knight's chest.

"Ah……"

Alice raised a small voice which sounded like a shriek.

As the skin of both its wings had been burnt completely, the black dragon lost its ability to fly and wriggled violently in mid air. The black knight separated from its back, and with a trail of blood, started falling straight toward the cave entrance where the three of them stood.

First, the black sword stabbed upright into the gravel mixed ground, producing a dry sound. Next, at a place about ten mels away from the

three of them, the knight crashed. Lastly, the black dragon crashed into the considerably far rocky mountain, it moved its long tail while crying in agony, before it stopped moving altoghether.

In front of the three children who were staring wordlessly, the black knight was struggling in pain, trying to raise his upper body. On the dully shining metal armor's breastplate, the deep hole from the pierce wound could be seen. The knight's face, which was hidden behind the thick visor, was directed straight at the three.

His slightly trembling right hand stretched out as if asking for help. But immediately after that, a large amount of fresh blood gushed out of the neck of the armor, the knight then collapsed onto the ground. The red liquid spread wide from the body which no longer moved, soaking into the gaps of the black gravel.

"Ah…… ah……"

A thin voice leaked from Alice on Eugeo's right side. Moving as if she was sucked toward, staggering forward —— to the outside of the cave.

Eugeo didn't have any reaction. However, Kirito on his left made a low and sharp shout "Nooo!!" Alice heard that voice, her body trembled, trying to stop. But her feet were tangled, her body inclined forward. This time Eugeo also stretched his hand along with Kirito in reflex, trying to grab Alice's clothes.

However, their fingertips only sliced air.

Alice collapsed on the ground of the cave and let out a small gasp, followed by the trail of her long golden hair.

It's just falling. Even if I checked the «Window», Life would be reduced by just one or two points. However, the problem wasn't that. The moment Alice fell, her right hand stretched forward, and went about twenty cens past the strangely clear boundary between the bluish grey cave floor and the ash colored ground ahead. The pure white palm touched the pure black gravel. The Land of darkness, Dark Territory's ground.

"Alice–……!"

Kirito and Eugeo unanimously called, they stretched out both hands and grabbed Alice's body tightly. Normally, doing something like this would get

them yelled at until they regretted it, but this time, she just stood firm as if in a trance, and was pulled back into the cave.

Alice, who was held up by Eugeo's and Kirito's hands, had her eyes wide opened at the defeated black knight, before long, her gaze dropped to her right hand. The fluffy palm still had sand and small stones stuck to it, every single grain pitch black.

"……I…… I……"

Alice murmured in a grave tone, as Eugeo mindlessly stretched his hands out to her right hand. He rubbed her palm, wiping out all the grains of sand, and said earnestly,

"I-It's alright, Alice. You didn't go out of the cave. Your hand just touched it. That, surely, isn't forbidden, right? Right, Kirito?!"

Eugeo lifted his face and looked at his partner's face as if to rely on him. But Kirito wasn't looking at Eugeo nor Alice. While standing on his knees, his gaze was sharply running through the surroundings.

"W-What's the matter, Kirito?"

"……Don't you feel it, Eugeo? It's like…… someone…… something……"

He frowned and started looking around again after speaking, however, in the cave there wasn't even a bug, let alone a human. The only thing that entered his vision was at the place ten mels away, the dead black knight. The figure of the Integrity Knight who had won the battle had already disappeared from the sky.

"It's just your imagination, rather than that……"

Let's get Alice to the other side of the cave quickly.

As Eugeo was about to say that, Kirito grabbed his shoulder at full force. While frowning, Eugeo followed his partner's gaze, immediately after that, his body became intensely rigid.

Near the ceiling of the cave, there was something strange.

A violet circle shook like the surface of water. With a diameter of about fifty cens, vaguely looking out of it, was —— a human face. It was hard to tell if it were male or female, young or old from its plain features. Its skin was

pale, its head didn't have a single strand of hair. Both of its eyes which opened in a perfect circle were also void of emotions. However, Eugeo could instinctively guess. Those eyes weren't looking at him or Kirito, but at the person who was sitting absentmindedly on the ground, Alice.

The stranger's mouth started moving, through the violet membrane, strange words could be heard,

"シンギュラー・ユニット・ディテクティド。アイディー・トレーシング……"

Both its eyes, which looked like balls of grass blinked briefly, then once again, the mysterious voice said,

"コーディネート・フィクスト。リポート・コンプリート"

Then, the violet window suddenly vanished. Once Eugeo belatedly noticed that the stranger's words might be some kind of the sacred arts' ritual phrase, he hurriedly looked at Alice, Kirito, then finally himself, but he didn't feel that anything had changed.

Even so, the event was too strange to ignore. Eugeo exchanged glances with his partner, the two helped to lift Alice up, as if to carry their childhood friend who was still trembling, back into the cave ——and started trotting in the original direction they had come from.

Eugeo couldn't remember how they returned to Rulid village.

Going back across the lake where the white dragon lay, and continuing to run after they jumped into the opposite exit. They slipped many times as they were running on wet stones, but they went through the long cave with just a fraction of the time when they came, when they jumped into the white light they finally saw, the afternoon sunlight was still brightly pouring onto the forest.

However, Eugeo's anxiety of getting captured hadn't disappeared easily. Even at this moment, he still had the feeling that the violet window would open right behind them, with that strangely pale face appearing again, so he didn't let himself rest.

Under the trees where small birds sang, passing the bank of the small river where a group of small fish moved here and there, the three hastily walked in silence. Crossing the hill which was supposed to be the Northern pass, going past the twin ponds, before finally arrived at the north Rulid bridge.

With additional walking, they had returned and rested at the base of the old tree, which had been their meeting place at dawn, but still didn't talk much. The three exchanged glances before smiling slightly.

"Hey, Alice, here."

Kirito said and thrusted the heavy looking wicker basket forward. Inside it was packed with the fruit of today's adventure, the «Summer Ice»; Eugeo now realized the existence of the basket which he had completely forgotten. To hide his embarrassment, he said with a calm face,

"When you get back home, you'd better bring them to the cellar quickly. That way, it should be able to hold out until tomorrow, right?"

"……Yeah, alright."

The unusually obedient Alice nodded, after taking the basket, she looked at two boys' faces in turn; finally, her usual clear smile floated to her face.

"You can look forward to tomorrow's boxed lunch. As the reward for your hard work, I'll do my best."

You mean Sadina-obasan will do her best, don't you?, which of course, Eugeo and Kirito didn't say out loud. The two exchanged glances for a moment before nodding at the same time.

"……Hey, what were you thinking?"

Alice asked while wearing a perplexed expression, the two boys slapped Alice's shoulders, before saying in unison——

"It's nothing! Well, let's go back to the village!"

By the time they walked to the village square, the place where they parted, the real sunset sky hovered above them. Kirito lived in the church, Alice went back to the village chief's residence. Eugeo arrived at his house on the west side of the village just a few seconds before the six o'clock bell rang.

Eugeo stayed silent throughout the dinner he arrived at, barely on time. Even though he was confident that his brothers and sisters, and even his father and grandfather never had an adventure like him today, he was somehow unable to bring himself to boast about it.

It seemed he couldn't speak about the fact that he had seen the Land of darkness with his own eyes —— the fierce battle between the Integrity Knight and the black knight, and then the strange face which appeared at the end; because once he talked about that, it wasn't hard to guess what the reaction from his family might be, and it made him scared.

That night, Eugeo who went to bed early thought he would be able to forget everything he saw at the end of the adventure. But he wasn't able to, as the Axiom Church and the Integrity Knight which he had been holding in admiration and respect up until this point had turned out to be something completely different.

Part 4

Solus had set, then arisen —— and then, it was daily life as usual, without any changes.

Normally, on the day after the rest day, Eugeo would go to the workplace slightly depressed, however, today he somehow felt relieved. I've had enough adventure, I'm a woodcutter after all. As he was thinking this as he walked out of the village's south gate, Kirito joined him on the border between the fields and the forest.

Eugeo noticed a slight sense of relief on the face of the partner he had known for a long time. The other also noticed the same expression on Eugeo's face. For a short while, the two exchanged grins to hide their embarrassment.

They walked along the narrow forest path for a short while before obtaining the Dragon Bone Axe from the storage hut, then after walking several more minutes, reached the base of the Gigas Cedar. Eugeo was grateful when he thought of continuing to cut the tree trunk like nothing had changed.

"Alright, make sure you get in a few good hits and treat me to Siral water today."

"Isn't that what you have always had to do until recently, Kirito?"

As they jabbed at each other, Eugeo set up the axe. The first strike produced a Gon high-pitched sound. I'm in a good condition today. Eugeo thought.

As the morning went on, the two continued making good strikes on the tree trunk. The reason was, as they were swinging the axe, if they lost concentration, their minds would return to the scene they saw yesterday —— it wasn't something that could be denied.

After striking nine sets of the fifty strikes per set requirement, Eugeo's stomach started rumbling.

Eugeo looked up into the sky as he wiped his sweat, Solus was already reaching the middle of the sky. Like always, after one more strike, Alice would bring the awaited lunch. But today we can slowly eat pie with cold milk. His empty stomach hurt just by imagining it.

"Otto……"

Just thinking about lunch made Eugeo's grip slip. After wiping both his wet palms, he cautiously held the axe in a tighter grip.

Suddenly, the sunlight became dim.

Sudden rain? That's annoying. Eugeo thought while looking up.

A shadow could be seen flying across the blue sky above Gigas Cedar's branches at a high speed. Eugeo's heart flinched.

"The flying dragon……!?"

Eugeo unintentionally shouted,

"Oi…… Kirito, just now!!"

"Aa, it's the Integrity Knight from yesterday!!"

His partner's voice was also frozen in fear.

The flying dragon along with the silvery white knight sitting on its back swept over the treetops and disappeared from their eyes in the direction of Rulid village.

Why would he comes to a place like this?

In the complete silence, as if the birds and bugs were in fear, Eugeo thought in confusion.

The Integrity Knights fight against the Axiom Church's enemies and keep the order in place. In the current Human World where the four empires

divided and ruled, there are no rebel groups anymore, so aside from the forces of darkness, the Integrity Knights' enemies don't exist. What I heard about the knights' endless fights outside the Mountain range at the Edge, I actually saw it with my own eyes yesterday.

It is the first time I have seen a real Integrity Knight. Since I was born, the knight had never come to the village. And yet, why now――

"It can't be…… It can't be, Alice……"

Kirito murmured beside him.

The moment he heard that, the strange voice he heard back then returned vividly to Eugeo's ears. Beyond the violet window, blurting out mysterious phrases from the human with strange facial features. He felt chill down his spine as if he was suspended in freezing water.

"It's a lie…… it can't be true, just that…… with just that……"

He looked at Kirito's face while he talked, as if to seek agreement, but his partner was wearing a rare solemn expression while staring in the direction the knight flew. A few moments later, Kirito looked straight into Eugeo's eyes before giving a short call,

"Let's go!"

He took the Dragon Bone Axe off Eugeo's hand before running toward the north in a straight line.

"O……Oi!"

Something bad is happening. While he was thinking that, Eugeo also kicked the ground and quickly chased after Kirito.

They ran through the familiar small path of the forest at full speed while avoiding roots and rocks, as the path merged with the main road which went through the field. They couldn't see the shadow of the flying dragon in the sky over the village. Kirito loosened his feet slightly, and loudly asked the farmer among the ears of wheat, who wore a blue outfit and was looking up at the sky.

"Ridack-ojisan! Where did the dragon knight go!?"

The farmer looked like he had just woke up from a dream, after blinking many times, he finally replied,

"A…… Ah…… hello, it looked like it dropped at the village square……"

"Thanks!!"

After thanking him in irritation, the two continued running at full speed.

On various places along the main road and fields, were groups of villagers standing still. Probably, even among the elders, there might be no one who had actually seen the Integrity Knight before. Everyone just stared at the village with an expression of not knowing what to do. Eugeo and Kirito just ran past them desperately.

Passing through the village's south gate, running through the short shopping street, and, after crossing the small stone bridge, the two finally saw it. They caught their breath without their feet ever stopping.

The long arching neck and tail of the flying dragon occupied the northern half of the square in front of the church.

Its big wings folded to its sides, almost completely blocking the church from view. Its grey scales and the steel armor on various parts of its body reflected the light of Solus, which made it look like an ice sculpture. Its bloodshot eyes, void of emotion, were looking down at the village square.

In front of the dragon, shining even more dazzlingly, was the figure of the knight.

His frame was larger than anyone in the village. The heavy armor polished until it was like a mirror covered his entire body, without a single trace of cloth, as all the joints were covered by finely knit silver chains. The headpiece which mimicked a dragon's head had its forehead protruding out, on its sides were long decorated horns stretched backward, the knight's face was hidden behind the huge visor which was pulled down.

There was a long sword which had a silver grip hanging from his left waist. On his back, with a length of about a mel, was a reddish brown bow. It was without a doubt, the Integrity Knight who shot and killed the black knight that Eugeo had seen at the exit of the cave yesterday.

From the cross shaped opening of the visor, the knight stared wordlessly to the south of the square, and the dozens of villagers who had gathered lowered their heads in unison. On the last row, the figure of a young girl who had just lowered the wicker basket in her hand could be seen, Eugeo released the tension from his shoulders slightly. Alice, who was wearing

her usual blue dress and white pinafore, stared at the figure of the Integrity Knight from between the gap of the adults.

Eugeo elbowed Kirito's sides as a signal, they bent their bodies and moved, after they arrived behind Alice, Kirito whispered,

"Alice……"

Their childhood friend turned around, as her golden hair swung sideways, her surprised face looked as if she was about to say something. Kirito quickly put his finger to his mouth, before quietly whispering,

"Alice, be quiet. I think we need to get out of here right now."

"Eh…… why?"

Alice replied in a similarly low whisper, she seemed not to know the danger which currently drew near her. Eugeo thought she wouldn't notice the possibility without Kirito saying it.

"No…… that Integrity Knight is probably……"

How should we explain from there. As Eugeo was lost in thought for a moment. At that time.

A few low voices came from within the crowd. Looking up, walking to the square from the village hall, a tall man came into view.

"Ah…… father."

Alice muttered. The man was the girl's father and at the same time, the current village chief of Rulid, Gasupht Schuberg. The firm body was dressed in a simple vest, his black hair and beard were tidily trimmed. Even though he had inherited this Sacred Task from the previous village chief for just four years, his piercing discernment quickly gained him the respect of all villagers.

Gasupht approached the Integrity Knight alone without any trace of hesitation, before setting his hands in front of the body according to the Axiom Church's etiquette, then bowed. After raising his face, he addressed himself,

"I serve as the village chief of Rulid, Schuberg is my name."

The Integrity Knight lifted up his fists in front of his body in return to Gasupht, the armor made a faint sound when he nodded, before starting to speak,

"Overseeing the Norlangarth North Castle, Integrity Knight of the Axiom Church, Deusolbert Synthesis Seven."

It was hard to believe that it came from the throat of a living person, as it reverberated in a discordant intonation. The voice which had a steely feel to it echoed throughout the square, causing every villager in the area to become silent. Eugeo frowned as the sound felt as if it pierced directly through his forehead rather than come through the ears, even though he was more than twenty mels away. Even the village chief Gasupht was pushed half a step backward due to the pressure.

However, as expected from his courage, Gasupht corrected his posture, before issuing his impressive speech once again,

"It is an honor to have Sir Integrity Knight, who keeps the order of the vast Human World, visit our small village in this remote region. If I had known of your approach in advance I would have prepared a welcoming banquet."

"I can not accept that during the fulfillment of my official duties."

The knight's reverberating voice said, and with an ice-like glare under the visor —— he continued,

"Due to Gasupht Schuberg's child, Alice Schuberg's offense to the Taboo clause, I have come to arrest her for interrogation, followed by her execution."

A trembling could be seen on Alice's back who stood nearby. However, Eugeo and Kirito couldn't do anything, let alone speak. In their heads, the knight's words repeatedly echoed.

The village chief's strong body also shook for a moment. A short but clear curve could be seen slightly from the side of his face.

After a long silence, Gasupht said in a voice which had lost its luster,

"……Sir Knight, what was the sin that my daughter committed?"

"The Taboo Index, first chapter, third passage, eleventh paragraph, trespassing the Dark Territory."

At that moment, a big commotion began among the villagers who were holding their breath, listening to the exchange up until this point. The children widened their eyes, as every adult murmured the church's sacred phrase while tracing the curse protection symbol.

Then, Eugeo and Kirito finally acted, partly due to instinct. They thrust themselves in front of Alice, stuck together at their shoulders, hiding the girl from the villagers eyes behind their backs. However, they couldn't perform any further actions, as sudden movements would attract attention from the adults in front of them.

Inside Eugeo's head, What should we do, what should we do, was the only thought there, continuously repeating itself. Even without the depression which had welled up in his chest at this moment, he still wouldn't know what he could do.

All he did was stand upright, watching the scene up ahead, at the village chief Gasupht who was hanging his head deeply without making any actions.

It's alright, if it's that person. Eugeo thought. Even though he had never spoke to the village chief Gasupht much, he should have the most respect from the adults after Old Garitta.

However——

"……In that case, I will call my daughter, I think we should hear the reason from the mouth of the person herself."

The village chief who lifted his face said just that.

No, we can't let Alice come out in front of the knight. During the brief period Eugeo thought that, the Integrity Knight lifted his right hand up as his armor made a small sound. Seeing his fingertip pointed directly at him, Eugeo's heart squirmed uncomfortably.

"That is not necessary. Alice Schuberg is right there. You, and you……"

The knight moved his hand and pointed to the adults among the crowd in turn.

"Take the chief's daughter here."

The row of villagers in front of Eugeo quickly split. What stood between the Integrity Knight and Alice were just Kirito and Eugeo.

On the vacant road, two village acquaintances slowly approached. Their skin had lost the color of blood, but there were odd lights floating in their eyes.

The men forcefully tore Eugeo and Kirito, who were blocking them, off Alice, and pushed them to the side before grabbing Alice's arms.

"Ah……"

Alice raised a small voice, before clenching her lips tightly. As her rose colored cheeks faded, a faint smile floated to her face, It's alright. She nodded to the two like that.

"Alice……"

When Kirito called out in a small voice, the wicker basket in her right hand fell down due to the rough pulling. The lid opened, and its contents rolled out onto the stone pavement.

The two villagers pulled Alice, without letting her pick it up, toward the Integrity Knight.

Eugeo's stare was fixed on the wicker basket which was lying on its side.

Pie and hard bread were wrapped in a white cloth, small ice firmly filled the gaps. A piece of ice which had spilled out reflected the sunlight and shone brilliantly. In just a moment, the ice on the stone's surface, which was heated by the sunlight, immediately melted, turning into a small black spot.

Beside him, Kirito inhaled sharply.

As expected, he lifted his face and chased Alice's back, which was being pulled away. Eugeo also clenched his teeth, forcing his stiff legs to follow his partner.

The two men released Alice's arms beside the village chief, then moved a few steps backward before kneeling. Both their hands were clasped as they bowed down deeply, showing obedience to the knight.

Alice, who had been released, looked at her father with a pale face. Gasupht glanced at his beloved daughter briefly before turning away and looking downward once more.

The Integrity Knight nodded lightly before pulling an odd tool out from the back of his armor. It was a thick iron chain with three leather belts attached to it in parallel, there was a big loop at the tip of the chain.

The knight handed the tool to Gasupht.

"An order to the village chief. Bind the criminal."

"……"

As the village chief received the restraining tool as his confused gaze lowered, before Kirito and Eugeo finally arrived in front of the knight. The knight's headpiece moved slowly, before facing straight at them.

Eugeo was unable to see anything inside the cross shaped cut on the shiny visor, as it was wrapped in deep darkness, but the pressure from the gaze caused him to feel pain. He looked down reflexively, wanting to say something to Alice who stood in front of him, but unable to do so, as his throat felt like it was burning.

Kirito also faced downwards, like Eugeo, while taking shallow breaths repeatedly, then suddenly he lifted his face and shouted in a clear voice while he was still trembling.

"Knight-sama!!"

He inhaled deeply once, and continued,

"A……Alice didn't enter the Dark Territory! One of her hands merely touched the ground briefly! It was just that!"

However, the answer from the knight was simple,

"Is there any need of further acts?"

Along with those words, he waved his hand to the two kneeling men. The villagers stood up and grabbed the back of Kirito and Yujio necks, before starting to pull them away. While opposing them, Kirito shouted again,

"Th……Then, we also commited the same sin!! We were at the same place! If you're going to take her, then take us too!!"

However, the Integrity Knight no longer looked at them.

That's right…… If Alice committed the Taboo, then I should receive the same punishment. Eugeo thought so. He thought that from the bottom of his heart.

Then why won't my voice come out? I want to shout like Kirito, but my mouth feels like it has forgotten how to move, all it can do is spit out husky breaths.

Alice glanced and turned to look at them, It's alright. She smiled like that, and nodded.

Her father, who had lost his facial expression, turned the threatening restraint tool behind her slim body. He tightened the three leather belts at her shoulder, abdomen, and waist. Alice's face distorted just slightly. After he finished tightening the metal fixtures, he staggered a few steps backward, and looked down once more. The knight walked toward Alice, before grabbing the end of the chain dangling behind her back.

Eugeo and Kirito were pulled back to the center of the square, then forcefully pushed down on their knees.

Kirito put his mouth near Eugeo's ear while he pretended to stagger, and quickly whispered,

"Eugeo…… listen, I'll use this axe to attack the Integrity Knight. I should be able to buy a few seconds, you use that chance to take Alice and run away. Run to the wheat fields in the south, blend into the gap in the fields and go into the forest, you won't be easily seen that way.

After Eugeo glanced at the Dragon Bone Axe Kirito held, he was somehow able to squeeze out his voice,

"……Ki…… Kirito…… but…"

Yesterday, haven't you already seen the Integrity Knight's terrifying sword and bow skills? If you do something like that, he'll kill you immediately…… just like that black knight.

As if he could read Eugeo's thoughts, who was unable to speak, Kirito continued,

"It's alright, that knight didn't execute Alice right here. Probably, without an interrogation first, he can't just kill me. I'll find a chance to escape too. Also……"

Kirito's burning gaze was directed at the Integrity Knight, who was confirming the tightness of the restraint tool. Each time he pulled the leather belts, Alice face became distorted in pain.

"……Also, it's fine even if we fail. As long as we are taken along with Alice, there must be a chance for us to escape. But right now, if Alice is taken alone on the flying dragon, there is no more hope."

"That's……"

That's probably right.

But —— such a reckless idea which can't even be considered a plan, isn't it «Treason against the Church»? The Taboo Index, first clause, first passage, first paragraph, defined it as, the greatest sin——

"Eugeo…… is there any need for hesitation!? Who cares if it's Taboo!? Is that more important than Alice's life!?"

Kirito's low but tense voice hit Eugeo's earlobe.

Right. It's just as he said.

Inside Eugeo's heart, he shouted to himself,

——We three had decided that we would be together from birth till death. Working together, so that one could live for the sake of the other two, we did vow that.

Then, there's no reason to hesitate. The Axiom Church and Alice, which is more important? That answer is already decided. It's already decided. That is —— that is ——

"Eugeo…… what are you thinking, Eugeo!!"

A voice which now sounded like a shriek tore out from Kirito.

Alice was watching at the two. She shook her head with a worried face.

"That is…… that…… is……"

A hoarse voice came from his throat, as if it wasn't his own.

However, he couldn't finish his words. Even inside his head, he couldn't form the rest of the words. Zukin, a sharp pain ran up his right eye. The continuous throbbing pain interfered with his thinking. Zukin, zukin, a blood-like color spread in his vision, covered everything altogether, as the senses from his limbs faded.

At this time, the village chief had noticed the unusual event occurring, caused by the two of them. He slowly moved his arm, and ordered the two villagers standing behind the two,

"Take those children out of the square."

Immediately after that, Eugeo and Kirito's napes were grabbed and dragged backward.

"Damn…… let go!! ——Village chief!! Gasupht-ojisan! Is this alright!? Is it alright to let Alice be taken away like this!!?"

Kirito struggled as if he went insane, shook off the man's hands, readied the axe in his hand, preparing to charge in.

However, his feet, which wore simple leather boots, couldn't even make a single step forward. Before he could start running, something surprising had occurred.

The moment the Integrity Knight, who had finished confirming the leather belts on Alice, glanced at Kirito, the Dragon Bone Axe which was held in a tight grip made a sharp metallic sound before flipping out of his hands. The knight touched neither the sword on his waist nor the bow on his back. He didn't move even a single finger. It was as if his intention itself formed a real blade and hit Kirito's axe, sending it flying to the edge of the square.

Kirito who had received the aftereffects from the unusual impact also had his body suppressed as he collapsed. Immediately, several men joined in and completely sealed his movements.

His right cheek was pressed against the stone pavement, while he gave off an expression of pain, Kirito desperately shouted,

"Eugeo! Please, go!!"

"A……u, a……"

Eugeo's whole body trembled.

Go. I have to go. I have to take Alice back from the knight's hand, then escape to the southern forest.

A faint voice echoed from a corner of his mind. But immediately, a sharp pain attacked his right eye as if it was stabbed, blowing off all his intentions. Together with the pulsing red light, another voice noisily reverberated like a cracked bell.

The Axiom Church is absolute. The Taboo Index is absolute. Disobeying it isn't allowed. No one is allowed to do so.

"Eugeo, at least get these guys off me!! Then I can……!!"

The Integrity Knight paid no more attention to the commotion at the square, he set the end of the chain to the saddle on the back of the flying

dragon. As the dragon lowered its neck, the knight effortlessly climbed into the saddle. The silver armor gleamed brightly.

"Eugeo————!!"

Kirito screamed as he was vomiting blood.

The white flying dragon raised its body, and spread open its wings. The loud sound rang twice, thrice.

Alice, who was bound to the dragon's saddle, looked straight at Eugeo. She was smiling. As if she was saying 'Goodbye,' with those blue pupils of hers. Her long golden hair shook from the wind caused by the flapping wings, glittering as brilliantly as the knight's armor.

However, Eugeo couldn't move. He couldn't make a sound.

As if his legs were rooted to the ground, he couldn't move even slightly.

Prologue II

(June 2026)

Part 1

While taking a gulp of iced milk coffee and enjoying the mellow fragrance as she slowly swallowed, Asada Shino let out a long sigh.

She was watching a vague scene of colorful umbrellas passing by through the old-fashioned glass window. She disliked rain, but sitting on the table seat in this coffee shop, which was like a back alley hideout, and watching the grey view of the damp street couldn't get her into a bad mood. The furniture in the shop had no indication of technology, and a nostalgic scent from the kitchen inside the counter gave her an illusion, like falling into a border between the real world and virtual world. It was as if the school class just an hour ago was an event from a different world.

"It falls quite a lot, doesn't it."

It took a little while before she realized the baritone voice coming from over the counter was directed at her. Of course that was certain, as there was no other customer. Directing her gaze toward the café au lait colored master, who was carefully polishing a glass, Shino answered:

"Yes, it's the rainy season after all. It seems it will continue to rain until tomorrow."

"I'm certain that this is the Undine mages' actions."

The scary faced giant issued the words with a red face, before inadvertently making a bitter smile.

"……When you tell a joke, it will lose its effect if you make a face like that, Agil-san."

"Mu……"

The scene of the coffee shop and bar, «Dicey Café»'s shopkeeper Agil groping his brows and mouth for 'a face like that', seemed like it could make children immediately start to cry, Shino who was watching it let out a slight laugh. She then quickly brought the glass to her mouth and gulped down some coffee.

How would he interpret Shino's reaction? Right after Agil made an intense frightful face in a satisfying manner, the doorbell rang. The new customer stopped moving just as he walked one step into the shop and saw the master's face, then shook his head before saying,

"……Hey Agil, if you greet the customers with that face every time, surely this shop will go out of business very soon."

"I-It's not. That was a special favor used for jokes."

"……No, that's also wrong."

As he was disproving Agil, he put his umbrella into the whiskey barrel near the door before looking at Shino and raising his right hand.

"Otsu."

"You're late."

She frowned a little as she responded, the person she was expecting —— Kirigaya Kazuto shrank his neck before making an excuse,

"Sorry, I haven't taken a train for quite some time now……"

He sat on the opposite side of Shino, then undid a button of his open-collared shirt.

"You didn't come on your bike today?"

"I don't want to ride it through the rain…… Agil, Caffè Shakerato for me."

Shino looked at the relaxed Kazuto who had ordered an unfamiliar drink, his neck was as thin as his avatar in the virtual world, his face also couldn't be said to be healthy.

"……Aren't you too thin? You should eat more."

Shino said frowning, but Kazuto just waved his hand.

"From here on it would go back to my standard body weight anyway. But from Friday until Sunday, it would drop again……"

"Training on the mountain?"

"No, nothing but sleep."

"Then why did you get thinner?"

"Not drinking and eating at all."

"……Hah? Are you aiming for enlightenment?"

Shino tilted her head as she was unable to understand the meaning of his words, at that moment, a light click-clack sound could be heard from the counter. What she saw was the master who handled the silvery shaker with an elegance mismatched with his big frame —— but saying it that way might be rude. As Shino watched while thinking that, Agil gently poured the contents of the shaker into a wide coupe glass, before putting it on a tray and carrying it out.

The glass which was placed in front of Kazuto contained a light brown liquid topped with smooth brown foam.

"This is the Caffè…… something or other you ordered just now?"

Shino asked, Kazuto then slid the glass with his fingertips toward her. 'Itadakimasu,' she lifted up the glass as she muttered, and put it at her lips. The texture of the thick creamy foam, the refreshing chill, and the coffee aroma visiting in turn, after swallowing, the magnificent sweet aftertaste still softly persisted. It was worlds different from the iced café au lait that could be bought at the school's vending machine.

"……It's very good."

As Shino muttered, Agil made a satisfied look before hitting his thick upper arm.

"Without these fantastic bartender arms, it wouldn't be that creamy."

"Can't stop boasting about your skill level ever since coming back to reality, huh. Leaving that aside, Agil, what's this smell?"

Kazuto asked as the smell stimulated his nose, the shopkeeper cleared his throat and answered,

"Boston-style baked beans. These fantastic arms of rock……"

"Heh–, a taste of your wife's hometown, huh? Then I'll take that."

Agil, who was interrupted mid-speech, walked away with his lips in a へ shape; Kazuto recovered the glass in front of Shino, then took a gulp. He exhaled, corrected his posture on the chair, before looking straight ahead.

"……How is he now?"

She understood the meaning of the sudden question right away. However, Shino didn't reply immediately, she seized the glass from Kazuto's hand again, this time she took a bigger gulp. As the smooth cream passed down her throat, the rich fragrance escaped to her nose. That stimulus reconnected the fragmented thoughts in her mind, changed them into a short words,

"Yeah…… He seemed to have calmed down quite a lot."

Half a year ago, in 2025, the «Death Gun» incident occurred.

One of the three perpetrators at that time was also Shino's only friend, Shinkawa Kyouji, had received an exception after the lengthy trial of the juvenile case, he was transferred to be imprisoned at a juvenile rehabilitation facility last month.

During the trial, he had remained stubbornly silent, even the psychiatric examination performed by an expert couldn't make him open his mouth; however, a day about six months after the incident, he started to agree to the counselor's queries, bit by bit. Shino could vaguely guess the reason for that. Six months —— or one hundred and eighty days, was the retention period of the unpaid fee in the VRMMO game «Gun Gale Online». Once that period had passed, Shinkawa Kyouji's other self, or it could be said his true self «Spiegel» would disappear from the GGO server, which led Kyouji to be prepared to finally face reality.

"I planned to visit him once he improves a little. I think this time he'll let me meet him."

"I see."

As he gave a short response to Shino's answer, Kazuto looked toward the pouring rain. After several seconds of silence, Shino intentionally broke it as she made a dissatisfied face.

"——Hey, normally at that point, you should be asking if I'm alright, shouldn't you?"

"Eh, ah, I-I see. ——Erm, then what about Sinon?"

After a rare success at making Kazuto panic, Shino grinned as she embraced the sense of satisfaction.

"I've already watched all the collection of old action movies you've lent me. The one I like most is probably the guy avoiding handgun bullets by rolling

toward cover. If you ever think of going back to GGO, I'll show it in our next practicing meet."

"I-Is that so? Then it's great…… please be gentle……"

To the slightly twisted smiling face of Kazuto, Shino had to suppress her laughter.

The fear of guns that Shino had suffered from for more than five years, even now still can't considered to have completely vanished yet. Even though she seemed to be enjoying the gun action movies, it would still make her heart jump when she unexpectedly saw the guns in the town corner's posters, or the toy store's show window. When she thought about it now, it seemed to be just a normal cautious reaction. Since she couldn't be certain that she wouldn't meet a real criminal possessing firearms in the real world some day.

In addition, Shino thought that the disappearance of the intense reactions of denial upon seeing images and photos of guns, such as fainting and vomiting, was already more than enough. She also no longer felt alienated at school. She was now able to eat lunch with several friends. However, it put Shino in a slightly complicated situation as the topic they always talked about concerned the boy sitting in front of her waiting at the school gate to take her on his bike.

As Shino was unawarely thinking about that, Kazuto noticed her mild expression, and nodded,

"Then, everything from the Death Gun incident is already over, right?"

"Yeah…… That's… right."

Shino also nodded slightly, before shutting her mouth. There was something, she seemed to recall something from the corner of her mind and tried to pull it out, but before she could do so, the shopkeeper appeared from the kitchen before placing two steamy plates on the table.

The scene of glossy amber colored kidney beans with cube-cut bacon placed in the middle caused an outbreak of hunger from the stomach, which had already digested that day's lunch. Shino grabbed the spoon as if she was pulled towards it. At that point, she returned to her senses and quickly pulled her hand back before speaking,

"Ah, I-I didn't order this."

Then, a faint mischievous expression floated on the rugged face of the big framed master.

"That's fine, it's a treat… from Kirito."

By the time Kazuto who had heard it opened his mouth wide to protest, the shopkeeper had already went back to the counter calmly. As Shino tried to suppress her laughter within her throat, she grabbed the spoon again before slightly waving it at Kazuto.

"Thanks for the treat."

"……Well, it's alright. I just finished my part-time job, my wallet is still warm anyway."

"Heh, you're taking a part-time job? What kind is it?"

"The one I mentioned earlier about neither eating nor drinking for three days. Well, we can talk about that after clearing today's main topic. For now let's eat while it's still hot."

Kazuto grabbed the small bottle of mustard and dropped a lot of it at the edge of the plate, before passing it to Shino. She did the same then used the spoon to scoop a heap of beans into her mouth.

A nostalgic and simple western style taste could be felt from the cooked beans, which was fluffy to the core and released a lot of soft sweetness. The thick bacon which had no excessive fat, broke down into pieces on her tongue.

"This is also…… very delicious."

As she muttered, she looked at Kazuto who was eating greedily before asking,

"He said Boston style right? What kind of seasoning does it use?"

"Hmm…… I forgot its name but, it seems to be a crudely produced syrup. What is it again, Agil?"

The shopkeeper, who went back to polishing the glass, glanced toward them with his face lifted before replying,

"Molasses."

"Yeah, that's it."

"Heh…… of American cuisine, I thought you only knew hamburger and fried chicken."

The latter part of her words was reduced to a whisper, Kazuto gave a bitter smile,

"That's prejudice. I have talked to quite a few good guys from over there too."

"Yeah, definitely. Just the other day, I was deep in talk about sniping with a girl from Seattle over the GGO international server for three hours. Ah–, but…… it's just him that I can't understand……"

"Him?"

Kazuto, who had already emptied more than half of his plate, repeated the word while still chewing.

"That's today's topic anyway. You knew about last week's fourth Bullet of Bullets individual final already, right?"

Abbreviated to «BoB», it was the name of the battle royale tournament to decide the strongest in Gun Gale Online, Kazuto immediately nodded.

"Yeah, I watched the broadcast with everyone. Oh, I still haven't congratulated you yet. ……Well, it might be a regrettable result to Sinon though. Anyway, congratulations for the second place."

"T……Thank you."

She wore a serious face while saying that so as to hide her embarrassment, then quickly continued,

"If you've already watched the broadcast then it's quicker. Even though the winner is the player named «Satrizer»…… He, it was his second time being the champion."

Kazuto who heard that blinked a few times, his consciousness seemed to follow his gaze upward.

"Come to think of it…… In the field of the third BoB I participated, you told me about the US player who only had a knife and a handgun but managed to win the first tournament…… ——Eh, but I'm certain that since the second tournament, the server was divided into US and JP, it was no longer possible to connect from America, isn't it?"

"It's supposed to be like that…… Actually, there was no US entry in the second and third tournaments. But this time he somehow managed to avoid the block, or there was a connection to the management team…… Well, either way he was accepted. But you would realize the legend of «Satrizer» just by watching his fights once."

"Yeah. Even though it was from the broadcast screen, I noticed that Sinon was fired up"

Kazuto grinned as he said that. Shino pouted before replying.

"I-It wasn't just me. All thirty finalists…… no, since he is not included, all twenty-nine finalists were fired up too. And there were even some among us who had lost to him in the first tournament. Even though America is the home of FPS, but breaking into the battle royale stage of Japanese's GGO, which is the origin of «The Seed» engine…… but, when the lid is opened……"

"A repetition of the first tournament…… right?"

Shino nodded with her lips protruded and bent into a へ shape. The spoon in her right hand carried the last thick cube of bacon into her mouth, savoring the simple yet rich taste of the food had reset her thought, and last week's memories resurfaced.

"……Even though the result was like that, the topic went circles around his complete victory. Because that guy, at the start, didn't have any weapon."

"Eh……bare hands?"

"Yeah. Well, instead of weapons, he had the «Army Combative» skill. He defeated his first target just by grappling, robbed the weapon from his target, then used it on the next target….. he just repeated this. The scene of him using just his bare hands to defeat other players while they were reloading didn't only occur two or three times. It can be said that…… the battle was in a different dimension……"

Shino muttered while letting off a sigh, Kazuto folded his arms before shaking his head,

"But…… In short, Satrizer's build was the close combat type, right? If so, he shouldn't be able to retaliate a mid-ranged or long-ranged attack, should he? Rather, more than half of all GGO players are of those build too……"

"You… you actually saw the scene when I lost to him, didn't you?"

"Yeah, in ALO. When Satrizer was approaching your hiding place in a straight line and was less than three minutes distance away, everyone was like『Not that way–!』or『Sinon, behind you–!』together."

"Yeah, that."

Shino let out a big sigh as the amazing and at the same time disgracing scene revived in her mind, before saying in the calmest tone she could muster.

"I heard from eleven people who had been defeated directly by him after the tournament, almost every one was defeated using the same method. He shouldn't have had any data about them, yet he was able to clearly read their movements, as he ambushed them at an extremely close range, killing them without giving them any time to use their weapons. I don't know about America, but far from grappling fights in the JP server, even using knives to fight with is unheard of……"

"……Eh, I heard that after the third tournament, the number of players using light saber had increased though……"

To Kazuto who faintly said so, Shino inadvertently gave a bitter smile.

"That's…just trying to imitate your showy performance. It's true that early in this year, there were players practicing to cut bullets with the light saber, but it seemed no one could actually accomplish it."

——Even though she said that as if it was about other people, Shino herself had purchased a small sized light saber and practiced in secret with the soldier mobs as well. As a result of one month's struggle, aside from the initial shot from the rapid-fire assault rifle, she still couldn't reach the level required to defend herself from successive bullets, and without at least defending against all three shot burst, it couldn't be used in real combat. The dream of reaching Kazuto's level, who could defend himself from more than ten shots of rapid-fire, remained a dream, and she eventually gave up. The light saber was currently acting as a charm inside her storage.

However, if that time, she took it out of storage and equipped it on her waist, she wondered if she could be able to wound Satrizer at all. Shino immediately shook her head. This isn't the time for that. Switch thoughts, return to the topic.

"……Anyway, there was not a single JP players who could even aim their rifle at him, let alone shoot him. What was really terrifying about Satrizer wasn't his close combat technique, but his ability to predict the battle situation."

"Yeah…… I see…… But, is something like that possible……? It might be possible against beginners, but those participating in BoB's main battle are veterans, the chance of predicting their actions at a hundred percent shouldn't even exist……"

To Kazuto's words, whose expression was still in doubt, Shino shrugged lightly as she replied,

"He defeated more than ten people the same way, so it's already can't be considered a fluke. Well…… even though they're veterans, there might still be patterns in their actions. For this terrain, they should take this position, or using this route for their movement, there might be a hole in those veterans' theory."

As she spoke, Shino felt she realized a certain fact too late and gave a small sigh.

At that time, just before the conclusion of the fourth BoB tournament.

Shino, who was the last person left against Satrizer, was at her sniping point with her beloved Hecate II on the top floor of the partially collapsed building. Her prediction was, from the window of that floor she should be able to confirm Satrizer position, as he must cross the road below.

However, the enemy had read her prediction and hid near the sniping point in the same building ahead of her. Waiting until she had set up her rifle on bipod and laid in a prone position…… approaching her from behind, like a cat attacking its prey.

However, Shino didn't really want to be on the top floor, but a floor below, as its height was still able to provide enough angle to fire. The reason she didn't do so was because there was a library on the floor below. The reawakened memory of her sole relaxing spot in her middle school self had disturbed her concentration, by the time Shino realized that she was lost in thought for a few seconds, she was already on the top floor. And in the shadow of that floor, was the enemy who was waiting for her with a sneak attack……

In other words, Satrizer could predict Shino wouldn't be on the floor with the library but would set up her sniping position on the floor above. However, the reason she changed her sniping point wasn't a rational decision made by a sniper, but an entirely personal reason. Being able to read Sinon the sniper's actions was one thing, but he shouldn't be able to see through the real world bookworm Asada Shino. Could it be just a coincidence that Satrizer decided to pick a hiding location on the top floor of the same building? Or had he seen the library and was confident that Shino wouldn't choose that place for some reason……?

If the latter was the case, he didn't base his prediction on data or experience. But on something beyond the skill category of VRMMO game players…… which was reading the minds of other people……

"……non. Oi, Sinon."

With the fingertips of her right hand stretched out and fixed in mid air, Shino winced and lifted her face. As her eyes met Kazuto's worried face, she quickly said,

"Ah…… S-Sorry. Where were we again?"

"The patterns of veteran players, and the theory."

"O-Oh. Well…..yeah, for that reason…… I think the player who didn't use those patterns, whose actions aren't based on the theory, should be able to take up a position behind Satrizer……"

She said that half automatically, as she finally understood the core of the reason she had called Kazuto out today. She switched her mood, and drank the cold water from her glass, of which the ice had almost completely melted, but the chill sticking to her back didn't leave so easily.

Yes…… he crept and captured Shino from behind, defeating her in just a few seconds, as Satrizer stopped her from breathing and she was on the verge of losing the last bit of her HP gauge, he whispered in a low voice. Back then, she couldn't understand the meaning of the almost silent, English whisper, and it now came back to her ears as she thought about it,

『Your soul will be so sweet.』

It has an unusual meaning. In a net game PvP, it would be the speech said at the end of the battle, or just a sharp parting remark said by many players. Just roleplaying, it was just that.

After hearing herself saying so, Shino deliberately reopened the discussion with a cheerful tone.

"……So, talking about a person who defies theory, «No reason-no sense-no care», didn't a single person's name floated up? It maybe a little too early, but I'm thinking of reserving a spot in the fifth BoB for that person――"

She then made her right hand into a hand gun shape, and pointed it to Kazuto who sat in front of her.

"Thus, my invitation to you."

"E……Ehhh, Me?"

As she gave a smile to her companion who was taken aback, she gave her prepared speech at the same time,

"About that, I'm not saying an unreasonable thing like asking you to convert from ALO to GGO again, I'm just certain that you were indebted to me a little. Hey, after that, is the legendary weapon comfortable to use?"

"Uu."

Kazuto —— Kirito's golden long sword, «Excaliber» that he possessed in «ALfheim Online» was what Shino had collected just before it would have been lost in a bottomless pit. As she had awarded him the extremely rare item, of which only one existed in the server, she had the right to say something with such self-indulgence. Also, it would be attractive to Kazuto to be able to fight against a strong opponent.

As he didn't want to betray Shino's expectations, Kazuto cleared his throat before saying,

"I do have a feeling of wanting to fight that Satrizer too…… But, I think the main reason I, who was a gun novice, stood a chance in the last tournament, was because the other participants were inexperienced with fighting against a sword user. However, after listening to your story so far, Satrizer seems to be a close combat expert in addition to a gun master, doesn't he? I wonder if I have a chance of winning……"

"What's with that weak comment, it's very unlike you. It's true that he's strong, but he's still a VRMMO player, speaking like it's pro vs amateur is just……"

"Yeah, that."

Kazuto leaned his back against the old-fashioned wooden chair, his hands behind the back of his head.

"Is Satrizer really an amateur…… really just a VRMMO player?"

"……What do you mean? If he's not a player then what could he be?"

"A professional. Whose objective is not to play, but to practice in gun fights. Like a soldier…… or a member of the police's special force."

"Eh–!? You can't just say something like that."

To Shino who gave a bitter smile as she was certain it was a joke, Kazuto kept his serious expression as he continued,

"I read it from news sites so I still don't know full details…… but, it seems that the army and police of several countries, as well as private defense companies and such have already incorporated FullDive technology into their training. After polishing the skill in the virtual environment, don't you think it's possible for the so-called professional to test it by participating in BoB?"

"……That, can't be……"

As Shino was about to say Kazuto was reading too much into it, she recalled the sharpness of Satrizer's supernatural readings and the smoothness of his movements. The way of he fought could be described as a battle machine, thinking about it, it was certainly beyond the level of an amateur gamer.

However, if that man was really a professional soldier or police, would he spit out that speech just before he brought down his target? The soul is sweet, for something like that…… he was a real «Professional» but rather than a soldier, it was an assassin……

At that point, Shino had to forcibly stop her thoughts. All virtual worlds including GGO existed for enjoyment. It had nothing to do with what kind of a person Satrizer was in the real world. The next time she met him in the battlefield, she would blow him apart using her fifty caliber. As she was satisfied with her decision, she gave a clear call,

"No matter who he is, in GGO our conditions are even! I won't lose to the same opponent twice, I will absolutely win next time, I'll use all methods to achieve it!"

"……That «Method» is me, right?"

"One of the methods, to be exact."

Well? As Kazuto made a face saying so, Shino wore a grinning smile as she gave additional explanation,

"It'll be anxious for you alone against a close combat expert, so I actually called another person here. But mainly acting as a brake, preventing you from running wild, a controller in a sense."

"C-Controller?"

Kazuto, who repeated the word, seemed to be able to sense something from it, Gatan, his chair made a sound as he corrected his posture. He took out a thin mobile terminal from his pocket, ran his finger on its screen. He then lifted his face and said to Shino with a bitter smile,

"I see."

"……What do you see?"

This time Shino tilted her head. Kazuto then placed the terminal on the table, and slid it slightly toward Shino. Looking into the high-precision four inch monitor, she saw the map of the Okachimachi neighborhood with this coffee shop in the center. There was a blue light dot blinking along the route from the station to the shop.

"What is this light dot?"

"The person Sinon is waiting for is coming. About a hundred meters more."

It was just as Kazuto said, the light dot was moving toward this shop. Crossing the intersection, entering the alley, arriving at the center of the map, and at that moment,

Kararan, the doorbell rang, Shino lifted up her face. The person who had entered the shop folded the umbrella, her long chestnut hair swung around as she turned toward Shino. From there, a bright smile floated as if the rainy season had ended a little early.

"Yaho–, Sinonon!"

Part 2

To the nickname she hadn't been called by for more than five years, Shino inadvertently stood up as she gave a broad smile.

"Asuna, hello."

Yuuki Asuna made a lively sound from the natural wood floorboards as she walked along, the two girls then joined their fingertips to each other in a pleasant reunion. As they sat down on the chairs side by side, Kazuto, who had a slight expression of amazement asked,

"You two…… when did you become this close?"

"Huh? Last month I even spent a night over at Asuna's."

"W-What!? And I haven't even been to her house yet."

"Wasn't Kirito-kun the one who said 'I need to be mentally prepared' and escaped?"

As Asuna gave a little scowl, Kazuto sipped from his Caffè Shakerato in an embarrassed manner. To that state, Asuna couldn't help but smile as she thought 'It can't be helped' then she noticed Agil, who offered her some cold water and a towel, so she stood, getting off the chair before giving a bow.

"Excuse me for my long silence, Agil-san."

"Welcome. ——This really reminds me of the time when you two were lodging at the second floor of my shop."

"Even though you're saying so, but we're still freeloading at your shop in Yggdrasil City at the moment…… Hmm, what should I order today……"

As Asuna, who seemed to be an old friend of the giant shopkeeper, viewed the cork-bound menu, Shino took another peek at Kazuto's mobile terminal placed on the table. The blue blip stood still on the spot, perfectly overlapping the location of the coffee shop.

"……Then, I'll get ginger ale please. The spicy one."

After Asuna finished ordering and Agil had returned to the counter, Shino said while grinning,

"Hey, are you two monitoring each other's GPS coordinates? It seems you're getting along very well."

Kazuto then gave a serious look as he waved his right hand while saying 'No no no.'

"It may seem to display the exact coordinates of Asuna's terminal, and also seem to not require any operations from Asuna, but mine isn't that simple. Asuna, show it to her."

"OK."

Asuna nodded and brought out her mobile terminal from the bag hung on the back of the chair, before forwarding it in its standby screen to Shino. As she received it and took a look, the monitor was set up with a cute animated wallpaper.

At the center of the screen was a pink heart tied in a red ribbon, which was throbbing at an interval about one second long. Beneath the heart were two lines of several figures, whose meaning Shino didn't understand. A [63] figure on the left side was displayed in a big font, and a smaller [36.2] was on the right side. As Shino tilted her head, the left figure ascended to 64.

"What is……"

As Shino was about to ask 'What is this,' Kazuto seemed embarrassed and saying 'Don't stare like that.' At that point, Shino finally realized the meaning of this standby screen.

"Ehh…… this… could it be… the heart rate and temperature of Kirito?"

"That's correct– As expected from Sinonon, you have good intuition."

Asuna said as she clapped her hands. After Shino rotated her gaze between the mobile terminal and Kazuto's face several times, she asked the first question floating in her mind,

"B-But…… what kind of mechanism……?"

"It's here under my skin……"

Kazuto poked at almost the middle of his chest with his right thumb. He then extended his hand toward Shino, and made a crack of about five millimeters using two fingers.

"It is a very small implanted sensor. It monitors the heart rate and temperature, and sends the data to my mobile terminal via radio. From that, the almost real time information is then passed to Asuna's terminal through the network."

"Ehhh? Vitality sensor?"

This time Shino was greatly surprised, as she became speechless for about two seconds before beginning to speak,

"W-Why are you doing something like that…… Ah, could it possibly be a cheating prevention system?"

"N-No no!"

"No–!"

Kazuto and Asuna's actions were in perfect synchrony as they shook their heads repeatedly.

"No, it was when I started this part-time job, they recommended me to implant it, as it was terrible needing to stick electrodes in every day. After I told Asuna about it, she strongly urged me to get the vital data. She then forced me to set up an application, and installed it on her terminal."

"That's because– I don't want some unknown company to monopolize Kirito-kun's health data. I was against embedding something strange into his body in the first place."

"Eh, don't you seem happy whenever you look at the monitor every time you are free, so who are you to say that?"

To Kazuto word's, Asuna's cheeks became faintly red.

"I felt somewhat calm when looking at it. Thinking that Kirito-kun's heart is beating, it is as if we're on a trip together……"

"Uwa, Asuna, that sounds dangerous somehow."

While Shino laughed, she glanced down at the terminal in her palm again. The pulse rate had already sped up to 67, while the temperature had also rose slightly. Even though Kazuto made a poker face as he greedily drank the water, the data showed that he was actually very embarrassed.

"Hahah, I see…… That's right…… somehow…… it's nice……"

When she realized what she had carelessly muttered, Shino quickly lifted her face, and shook her head at Kazuto and Asuna who were blinking in surprise.

"Ah, no… that… there's nothing behind it, really. Well…… G-GGO also has a heart beat sensor, it was a supplement in the battle situation with bad visibility, it has no girly implications like this, that was what I had just thought."

As she quickly returned the terminal to Asuna's hand, she continued speaking,

"O-Oh, I almost forgot today's main topic. Hmm, I asked Asuna through mail about the fifth tournament in GGO, could you participate? Since it involves character converting, I don't want to forcibly ask you for the favor."

"Ah, about that, it's no problem. I have a sub-account in ALO so the house and items can be left to that account to maintain."

Asuna's cheerful smile and tender tone returned Shino to her calm self, she took a deep breath before speaking,

"Thank you, with Asuna's help, it'll be like giving an iron club to an ogre, or mounting a machine gun in a bunker. I think you will need a few days practicing with a photon sword to grasp the timing though."

"Yeah, I'll convert about one month before the tournament, I'll need you to guide me through the city then."

"Of course. The food in GGO also can't be neglected. Then…… it may be a little early, but I'll be in your care."

Shino's outstretched right hand was wrapped by Asuna's supple fingers. After gripping each other's hands tightly, Shino hit the surface of the table with her hand once.

"So, the main topic is now concluded. Let's see, next is……"

She said as she stared at Kazuto's face, as he chewed on the remaining ice from the opposite side.

"Should we hear it carefully now? About your suspicious part-time job. What kind is it? But even if we ask, knowing Kirito, it would probably be alpha testing some new VRMMO game."

Shino put forward the question she had held for more than thirty minutes as her gaze was fixed on his face.

"Well, it isn't a hit, but it's also not too far off the mark."

Kazuto nodded as he gave a bitter smile, then traced the micro sensor embedded at his heart's upper section with his fingertip.

"The test player part is correct. What I'm testing isn't a game application however, but a new BMIBrain Machine Interface of the FullDive system."

"Heh!"

Shino was surprised, while her eyes remained on Kazuto.

"That means, the next generation of AmuSphere will finally come out soon? Could it be, a tester for Asuna's father company?"

"Nope, it isn't related to Recto. How should I put it…… somehow I still don't really understand the whole picture about that company…… It is a venture company whose name I've never heard of before, and it has quite a lot of funds to pour into the development's expenses. There might be a large organisation backing them with funding……"

As Kazuto's expression remained vague, Shino tilted her head to the right and asked,

"Heh…… What is the name of the company?"

"«RATH»"

"It may sound ordinary, but I also never heard about it before. Hmm, is there an English word for that……?"

"I thought of the same thing too, Asuna knows it though."

Sitting beside Shino, Asuna drank her ginger ale before nodding and answered,

"In『Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There』there is a verse in『Jabberwocky』mentioning the creature that comes out in the dream. It seemed to be explained as a pig or a turtle."

"Hehhh……"

Even though it was a book she had read long ago, she didn't remember such a word at all. Shino imagined a strange creature with the head of a pig protruding out of a rounded shell, as she continued asking,

"RATH…… Then, they are independently developing the next generation of FullDive machines to sell? But wasn't AmuSphere co-developed by several companies?"

"No, I don't think so……"

Kazuto muttered in an unchanged, uncertain tone.

"The main machine is very large. Adding the console and the cooling equipment together, it could easily fill up this entire room…… Although the experimental first generation of the FullDive machine was that large, from there on, the size of the Nerve Gear has remained the same for five years. And the AmuSphere 2 (provisional) which is lead-developed by Recto will be on sale next year too…… oops, that is supposed to be confidential."

As Kazuto shrugged, Asuna gave a little smile before saying,

"It's fine, as they will announce it at the Tokyo Game Show next month anyway."

"Ah, so Recto will participate too. ……I hope it won't be too expensive……"

Asuna looked at Shino, who made upturned eyes, the daughter of the company president then made the same serious look and nodded deeply.

"I hope so too– But for now the price has yet to be decided…… Well, even though I'm already satisfied with ALO and don't really plan on buying a new device, they said it'll have a much higher rendering speed. And it'll be backward compatible with the software too."

"Is that so. Kuu–, should I find a part-time job too……"

Pushing aside the data in her account book which had surfaced in her mind, Shino continued to ask Kazuto another question,

"……Well, so that RATH company's huge FullDive machine isn't intended for home use? Is it for business use?"

"No, I don't think it's at that stage yet. Firstly, strictly speaking, it actually uses a different FullDive technique."

"Different……? Isn't it about creating a VR world using polygons, in which a user can Dive into it? What did you feel inside that world?"

"I don't know."

Kazuto shrugged, then said something unexpected in a casual tone,

"Due to the security protection, the memories of the world made by that machine can't be brought out to the real world. Everything I saw or did during the test, I currently have no memory about any of it."

"H……Hah!?"

Shino unintentionally yelled in a loud voice, then lowered her voice before asking,

"Can't bring out…… memories? Something like that… how is it possible? Could it possibly be that you get hypnotized after you have finished testing?"

"No no, it uses a purely electronic mechanism. No…… it could be called quantum……"

Kazuto who had cut off his words then took a glance at the mobile terminal placed on the table.

"Half past four, huh. Sinon and Asuna, do you still have time?"

"Yes."

"No problem for me too."

As the two nodded at the same time, Kazuto leaned his back against the back of the antique wooden chair——

"Well then, let me start explaining from the foundation. The question of…… «Soul Translation» technology."

Kazuto said another unfamiliar word slowly.

Somehow, it sounds like the name of an in-game spell Shino thought. She felt discomfort at the words related to the latest technology. Asuna next to her tilted her head slightly as she muttered,

"Soul……?"

"The first time I heard it, I had thought that it was a somewhat exaggerated name too."

Kazuto lightly shrugged before throwing a sudden question,

"The human mind, where do you think it is?"

"Mind?"

Shino was about to touch the middle of her chest by reflex, she then cleared her throat as she answered,

"In the head…… the brain, right?"

"Then let's magnify the brain, where should the mind be now?"

"Where……"

"The brain, or in other words, the lump of brain cells. See this……"

Kazuto extended his left hand with fingers tightly stretched out toward Shino. He then poked the middle of her palm with his right index finger, before tracing it around the entire palm.

"At the center is the nucleus, and wrapped around it is the cell's body……"

After hitting each of the five fingers, he drew the line from his wrist to his elbow.

"These are dendrites, which meet the axons, connecting this cell to the next. Where does the mind exist within this structure of a brain cell? The nucleus? The mitochondria?"

"Hmm……"

Asuna replied in place of Shino, who was mumbling,

"Kirito-kun, even though you said «connecting this cell to the next» just now, isn't the mind a network connecting many brain cells together? Just like…… the question about «What is the internet», the answer won't come out from paying attention to an individual computer."

"Yeah."

As they seemed to get the idea, Kazuto nodded deeply.

"The brain cells network is certainly the mind, I also think that is the correct answer under this current situation. But…… for example, this question «What is the internet», if investigated thoroughly, various answers could be obtained. Such as, the internet is the structure in which the computers around the world are connected to each other based on a common protocol——"

He then pointed at Asuna's and his mobile terminals lined up on the table in turn.

"Similarly, every single computer is a component of the internet. In addition, it could be said that the users in front of the computers are also a part of the internet as well."

At this point Kazuto took a break, after saying "Give me a bit," and took a sip from Asuna's ginger ale, he closed his eyes.

"Oo…… like always, the spicy taste here is really hot."

"It's completely different from buying it off a convenient store, right? Even though it seems to be based on a cocktail, I like the strong taste of ginger."

Shino recalled the taste of the spicy ginger ale from half a year ago, the first time she ordered due to Kazuto's lead. Without meeting him in GGO, she would never have set foot in this shop, which looked unfriendly from the outside, and the development of everything since then could be considered a miracle…… As she embraced that deep motion within her heart, Shino continued the topic,

"Then…… how does the human mind and the internet relate?"

After returning the glass to Asuna, Kazuto nodded once before using his hands to make a shape.

"Well ——Hmm, if the connections between a server and a router, the PCs and mobiles which look like a mesh is the «shape» of the internet…"

"Shape……"

"Then, what is its «essence»?"

Shino thought briefly before opening her mouth,

"In short, it's what flows in that shape…… in the network structure……? The electrical signals…..?"

"That may be so, since electrical or light signals are persistent media. The essence of the network is how they go along that structure and communicate the information…… Let's temporarily take an explanation here."

After he finished the gesture he made using both hands up until this point, Kazuto placed his hands on the table and joined his slim fingers together.

"Here, as I said earlier, the network of the hundreds of billion brain cells connecting together…… Now looking at the shape of the mind, what is the essence of the mind?"

"The media…… in other words, the flowing of electrical pulse along brain cells…… is the information?"

"Nope, the electrical pulse is, like this……"

Kazuto brought his right fist approached his spreading left palm.

"The synapse at the gap between neuron and neuron, is the sole transmitter of the substance. For the propagation along the brain cells route, could that phenomenon be called the essence of the mind?"

"Hmm……"

At the same time Shino frowned, Asuna smiled in a confused manner as she said,

"More than this is already impossible, Kirito-kun~ Because until now, science is still unable to find the answer of 'what is the mind' right?

"Well, that may be true."

Kazuto eventually smiled as he nodded.

"H-Hah!? Wait, the idea up to this point still can't solve anything, can it?"

As Shino became furious and protested, Kazuto took a chance to glance at the damp street, before continuing to speak in a serious tone,

"But, there are humans who approach the answer with their own theory."

"Their own…… theory?"

"«Quantum brain dynamics». It seems to have been proposed at the end of last century by an English scholar. After tackling the underlying theory

for a long time, «RATH» has finally managed to create that machine which looks like a monster…… ——From this point on, I still can't fully understand it yet. Just a moment ago, we talked about the structure of a brain cell."

Shino and Asuna nodded at the same time.

"The cell itself also has a frame to support its structure. It seems to be called «Microtubules». That framework doesn't just support, but acts like a skull too. The brain within the brain cell."

"H-Hah……?"

"That skull has the shape of a tube, in other words, a hollow pipe. Of course it's very tiny…… we're talking about a diameter in nanometers, but it isn't empty. There is something contained within the tube."

Shino inadvertently exchanged glances with Asuna, before looking at Kazuto and asking in a low voice,

"What is inside……?"

"Light."

Kazuto gave a short answer.

"A light particle…… or «Evanescent Photon» is what it's called. This photon is, in other words, quantum. That existence is like indeterminism, it is endlessly fluctuating according to the probability theory. The fluctuations…… that is what the human mind is, according to the theory.

Right when she heard those words, Shino could feel a shudder running about from her spine to both her arms for some reason. The mind and fluctuating light. That mysterious yet beautiful image welled up within her and at the same time, the thought Isn't that already the god's domain? appeared in her mind.

Asuna was also embraced by the same deep emotion, her brown pupils were blurred with an anxious light as she spoke in a slightly hoarse voice,

"Kirito-kun, the name of the new machine is…… «Soul Translator», right? Soul…… in other words, the collection of those lights is a human's soul?"

"RATH engineers call it «Quantum Field». But, by giving the machine such a name, they must have thought about it already…… That quantum field, and the human's soul."

"But then, what does it mean? Soul Translator is the machine that doesn't access the human brain, but the soul itself……?"

"When said like that, it doesn't sound like a machine anymore, but a magic item in a game instead, huh."

What he said had softened the atmosphere slightly, and Kazuto then continued speaking as he grinned,

"But, it isn't an act of magic or god's miracle. Let's plunge into the explanation of its structure for a bit…… What it does is recording the spin and vector of each photon inside the microtubule, the «Qubit» unit data. In other words, the brain cell isn't just a single gate switch to let electrical signals passing through, but it could be said that the cell itself is a unit of a quantum computer…… well, this part is already at the limit of my understanding though……"

"It's alright, I have already passed that limit a long time ago."

"Me too……"

Shino and Asuna surrendered together before Kazuto exhaled his breath in relief.

"The collection of photons which is the memory of that computer, perhaps, it might even be the human's soul…… RATH has given it an original name. «Fluctuating Light», which they abbreviated to——"

He paused slightly,

"«Fluctlight»"

"……Fluct…light."

Shino softly repeated the coined term with a mysterious sound. If what they had been talking until this point was all true, then the Fluctlight also existed in her own head too. No, by saying so, what she thought was «her» was……

The shudder from earlier returned to Shino, she rubbed her arms which extended out of the sleeves of her summer uniform. Next to her, Asuna also made a movement which looked like she embraced herself, while she spoke in a small voice,

"——Reading the Fluctlight…… No, the machine which «Translates» it, is what Soul Translator does. In that case…… the translation isn't just one way, right?"

Shino tilted her head as she couldn't understand the meaning of her words right away, at the same time, Asuna glanced at her, with pupils that were filled with the color of anxiety.

"Sinonon, think about it…… The AmuSphere we're using isn't just reading the movement commands sent to our body. It feeds the sight and hearing…… the five sensory signals into our brain, creating the experience of the virtual world. It's the core of the FullDive technology used in that machine, right? Then, the Soul Translator which could do the same thing should be the next generation machine, isn't it?

"……In other words…… it could write something into the soul of the person connected to it……?

At that point, both of them turned their gazes at Kazuto.

Although the black haired boy seemed to have hesitated a little, He nodded in agreement before long.

"Yeah…… Soul Translator, it's too long, so RATH shortened it to «STL», that translation machine is bidirectional. In the hundreds billion qubit data holding a human's Fluctlight, it translates and reads the words we understand, and at the same time, it translates and writes the information into a form we can read too. If it's not the case, it'd be just as Asuna said, it won't be possible to Dive into the virtual world. In short, it maintains and disposes the Fluctlight's five sensory information, and fills in the information about what being seen, or the sound being heard."

Then, Asuna leaned forward and asked what seemed to be her main question,

"Could it possibly be that…… could affect memory in the soul? Kirito-kun, you said just now that you don't retain any memories during the Dive. This means Soul Translator…… STL could erase or overwrite your memory, doesn't it?"

"No……"

Kazuto touched Asuna's left hand briefly to relieve her as he shook his head.

"The part that maintains the long-term memory data is very large and the archival method is very complex, at the current state it could be said that it's still out of reach. The reason that I don't have any memory of the Dive is merely because it seemed to be intercepted along the route to that part. In other words, it isn't completely erasing memory, it's just I can't get to remember it…… just like that."

"But, I'm……scared, Kirito-kun. Something like manipulating memories……"

An anxious expression still remained on Asuna's face.

"Besides, the person who brought that part-time job to you is Chrysheight…… no, Kikuoka-san of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, isn't he? While I think he isn't a bad person, I feel I can't see even the tiny bit at the bottom of his heart. It's somewhat similar to the Guild Leader. Somehow…… I feel like something bad is going to happen again……"

"……It's true that he never shows what he's thinking. And I also don't know his real social status nor professional duty, along with various things. But……"

As he cut off his words, Kazuto's pupils seemed not to focus at any place in the shop as he spoke,

"On the first day of the debut of business-use first generation FullDive machine at the Shinjuku amusement part, I rode the first train to line up. At that time I was still in elementary school…… 'This is it,' that was what I thought. 'This is the world that was calling me for a long time.' On the first release day of Nerve Gear, I also bought it with the money I had been saving up…… and kept diving into various games. At that time, I really didn't care about the real world. Eventually I was selected for SAO's beta test, and that incident unfolded…… terrible numbers of people had died. After two years of being captive and returning, Sugou and Death Gun incidents continued occurring one after another. I…… want to know. About where the FullDive technology is heading…… About the meaning behind those incidents…… For the Soul Translator, although its functionality is

entirely new, its architecture uses the medical-use Medicuboid as a prototype."

While Asuna, with her head held low, was listening to Kazuto's words, her shoulders trembled. Shortly after that, her steady voice flew through the quiet shop's interior,

"It's my premonition. About what is inside the Soul Translator. What if it doesn't end up as being a mere amusement machine…… Probably, there might be a dangerous side too. But……"

Kazuto imitated the motion of gripping his sword and swung it down as he spoke,

"Until now, no matter what world it was, I was always able to come back. This time too, I'll surely come back. Well….. in the real world I'm just a weak and powerless gamer though."

"……Even though without my backup, your back is wide open."

Asuna gave a light smile while exhaling a short breath, then looked at the face of Shino who was sitting beside her.

"Really, this man has so much self-confidence."

"Yeah, well, after all he's the legendary Hero-sama anyway–"

From the conversation between Asuna and Kazuto, which she could understood at once, even though it had words she heard for the first time, Shino didn't try to interfere too much and instead spoke in a joking tone,

"I already read『All Records of SAO Incident』which came out last month–, it's quite hard to believe this guy is the same『Black Swordsman』who appeared in that book."

"H-hey, stop it……"

Asuna giggled at the action of Kazuto who waved his hands while bent backward, as she said "Yeah, really," while nodding.

"Written in that book, it was said this leader had a big influence among the capturing guilds, even though the record itself is fairly accurate, a great amount of bias was added into the character description. Like when Kirito fought against the orange players……"

"『When I unsheathe the second sword, no one is allowed to stand before me!』"

"Kyahahaha," the two girls burst out into a grand laughter as Kazuto sat dejectedly on his chair with a blank expression. As Asuna felt relief and finally returned to her smiling face, Shino continued delivering the final blow,

"That book is also translated and is published in America. It means this Hero-sama is a world ranker now."

"……After I went through great lengths to forget it…… And I already agreed to forward the royalties too."

Shino was still smiling as Kazuto grumbled, she then recalled the question she had for a while and continued the topic,

"But, Kirito. After all, that STL does the same thing as AmuSphere, doesn't it? Creating a VR world using polygons, then sending the image and sound into the connecting person's brain, is there any point in spending large amounts of expenses on that machine?"

"Oo, that's a good question."

Kazuto straightened himself before giving a nod.

"What Sinon said just now,『Creating the VR world using polygons.』Polygons are, in other words, a collection of coordinates and surfaces…… the digital data. The current highly detailed modeling had reached the point where the trees or furniture is hard to distinguish from the real thing, but its essence is still the same."

He then quickly operated the mobile terminal placed on the table, and started up a pre-installed mini-game. The futuristic race car which was slowly rotating on the demo screen had a sweet interior, the curved surface of its body also didn't look awkward at all, it was indeed, a figure of a polygon model.

Shino lifted her face and slightly tilted her head.

"That's, well…… in ALO or GGO, when too many players gather at the same place, the rendering of the objects sometimes can't keep up. But aren't the fundamental basis of AmuSphere and STL the same thing? To create the 3D model of something which practically doesn't exist from nothing, for a user to both see and touch."

"Yeah, that's the point. Hmm…… how should I explain it……"

Kazuto was silent for a moment before lifting up the empty glass of Caffè Shakerato and showing it to Shino.

"Sinon, this glass exists in reality, right?"

"……Yeah."

While having a dubious expression, she gave a nod. Kazuto then brought the glass closer to her and said something difficult to understand,

"Now listen, this glass currently is in my hand, and at the same time it exists in Sinon's consciousness…… or Sinon's «Fluctlight» in RATH's term. To be more accurate, the light which reflected off the glass is perceived in Sinon's eyes, the electrical signal from her retina is changed into the glass object in the consciousness. Next, when I do this……"

Suddenly his left hand extended to completely block Shino's eyes. She reflexly closed her eyelids, rendering her vision in dark grey with a faint tint of red.

"How is it, did the glass inside your consciousness suddenly disappear?"

As she didn't know what Kazuto meant, Shino answered honestly immediately,

"……Really, I wouldn't forget it that soon. From seeing it, I could remember its color and shape, it's natural anyway. Ah…… but it progressively becomes vague though……"

"Yeah, that."

After he drew his hand back, Shino opened her eyelids, and gave a light frown at Kazuto.

"Just what is 'that'?"

"Listen…… at the time we see this glass or table or face of each other, the recreated record data is maintained in the sight processing section of Fluctlight. Even shutting the eyelids, it won't disappear right away, it isn't just a mere shadowgraph. Or else, the moment the glass can't be seen, it'd fade out of Sinon's memory……"

Kazuto then hid the glass in his right hand under the table.

"The moment Sinon sees the glass, the same data of its form is input into the sight perception section of Fluctlight. It allows Sinon to continue seeing the glass which is now no longer on the table. At a precision far beyond that of the polygons…… Or it could be said that it's exactly the same as the real thing."

"……It may be so in the theory…… But, it's dealing with the retention of human's consciousness, or in the other words, «Memory» isn't it? The outside manipulating the memory without hypnotism, how it could be done……?"

Shino closed her mouth after speaking to this point.

Just a while earlier —— hadn't Kazuto talked about the machine with that exact possibility? as she thought, Asuna, who had been listening quietly until this point, whispered in a low voice in place of Shino,

"The AmuSphere allows a user's brain to see the polygon data…… While the STL writes it into the human's consciousness… the short-term memory…… In short…… it's not an artificial thing. The things in the world created by STL, sight, inquiries, touch…… are the same level as the real things in our consciousness, is that so……?"

Kazuto nodded and spoke as he placed the glass back up on the table.

"Optical memory information…… or «Mnemonic Visual Data» as RATH formally calls it. To me, as I still have the memory of the very first test Dive…… it was different. Completely different from the VR world created by AmuSphere. It was merely an empty space about the size of a narrow room, but I……"

He cut his words for a moment, a smile that seemed to be forced then floated to one side of his cheek, as Kazuto continued,

"……At first, I didn't know that was the virtual world."

Part 3

The virtual world, which is indistinguishable from the reality.

There was a lot of fiction from the last century which dealt with this theme. Shino could also recall at least five titles of novels or movies with this theme right away.

In an era where the implementation of FullDive technology was used in consumer devices such as the Nerve Gear and AmuSphere, we finally came to a point to doubt: «is this reality really the reality?» —— and as we could read something like that from articles or blogs all over the place, Shino had also felt anxious before her very first FullDive.

However, when the lid had actually opened, could it be relief or disappointment that such worry was unnecessary? The world which was created by AmuSphere was without a doubt, a miracle given birth by cutting edge technology. The virtual world which was perceived by the five senses was brilliantly beautiful —— but that was why it was noticeably different from the real world. The scenes she saw, the sounds she heard, the things she touched, everything was too pure, or in other words, was too simple. The air had no dust, the garments didn't wrinkle, and the tables couldn't be broken. The 3D objects which were created from digital codes were restricted by the manpower needed to design them, and the CPU's power to display them. Of course she couldn't know how this would change in the future, but at least with the current technology of 2026, creating a virtual world which was indistinguishable from reality was impossible——……

And that, was what Shino had thought. Until today, before she had heard Kirigaya Kazuto's story.

"……That means, Kirito. You… perhaps even now…… are still inside the STL… that machine? The «Recollections» of Asuna and me you injected into it."

As to avoid the sudden shivering, before Kazuto could reply, Shino grinned as she spoke. Naturally, "But that's ridiculous anyway," she laughed it off as she thought so, but her companion frowned as he fixed his gaze on her.

"Wai……S-Stop it. I'm the real one."

As she hurriedly waved her hands, Kazuto remained in doubt as he spoke,

"If you're the real Sinon…… then you must remember what you promised me yesterday."

"P-Promised?"

"To thank me for calling me out today, you will treat me to as many of the most expensive dessert here, the «Dicey Cheesecake» as I want."

"E……Ehh!? I never promised such a thing! Ah, b-but I'm not an imposter, I'm the real one, right, Asuna?"

Looking beside her, Asuna who tightly grasped her hands whispered,

"Sinonon…… did you already forget? You promised to treat me to an all I can eat «Berry & Cherry Tart»……"

"Ehhhh!?"

Am I actually in the virtual world and operating this memory from there……? As she thought this, both Kazuto's and Asuna's cheeks trembled, and soon after that they let out slight laughter. At that point, she finally realized that her plan to tease Kazuto had backfired.

"N……Now you've done it, Asuna! Next time, in ALO, prepare to eat a hundred homing arrows!"

"Ahaha, sorry sorry, forgive me Sinonon!"

Asuna smiled as she tightly embraced Shino. While feeling the stiffness in her chest melted away by Asuna's action, innocent and overflowing with friendship, she turned her pouting face away. But her mouth immediately opened and let out a laugher alongside the other two.

As if to follow through the eased up atmosphere, Kazuto said in a slow tone,

"Be it the Fluctlight or the Mnemonic Visual, just hearing the term alone would make you feel that it's questionable technology…… But, the virtual world created by STL is in fact, far better than the one from AmuSphere which we are familiar with. Ultimately, it might be what we call a «Real Dream»……"

"D-Dream……?"

Shino blinked after hearing those surprising words, the Spriggan swordsman, who had an aura that caused the people surrounding him to become drowsy in ALO, nodded with a serious face.

"Yes. Creating the world by gathering the objects maintained in the memories together, that action…… isn't it almost like how dreams work? Actually, the brain waves of a human Diving in STL is fairly close to the pattern which occurs during sleep."

"Then, it means you're doing the part-time job within the dream? Earning just by sleeping through the period of three days?"

"T-That's what I told you in the beginning, didn't I? Sleeping throughout, without eating nor drinking. But of course, I got nutrition and water through an intravenous drip."

Now that he mentioned it, he really did say that right after he came into the shop. But I certainly didn't expect him to actually work by watching a long dream while lying on a gel bed. As Shino glanced upward, she muttered along with a sigh,

"Three days of continuous dreaming, huh…… If I could dream that long, there are many things I could do. Like not waking up just before eating a cake."

"That's too bad, as you won't remember what you ate during the dream anyway. Well, talking about having an all-you-can-eat cake every day……"

After talking jokingly until this point, Kazuto cut off his words in the middle. The small eyebrows Shino saw under his slightly long forelock frowned.

"……What's the matter, Kirito-kun?"

He didn't immediately answer Asuna's question, while his hand made a motion as if it was putting something into his mouth.

"……Cake…… no, not it…… It's harder…… salty…… but, delicious, what is……"

"Y-You remembered? Is it something you ate in the virtual world?"

"……Nope, I can't remember. But I have a hunch that it didn't taste like anything in reality……"

Kazuto continued frowning for several seconds longer, before finally giving up as he let out a sigh. Shino, who was silent up until this point, asked a question she was no longer able to hold in her mind,

"Hey Kirito, is something like that possible? To eat something in STL which doesn't exist in reality? As the virtual world created by STL is a collection of parts based on the memories of a Diver, then isn't it natural that the person can't see what he has never seen, and can't eat what he has never eaten?"

"Ah…… that's true. It's just as Sinonon said…… In that case, the virtual world from STL should have a very limited degree of freedom, shouldn't it? It can't create a world which is completely different from reality, like Aincrad or Alfheim."

Kazuto nodded slowly at what Asuna pointed out, before smiling as if to shake off his earlier irritation.

"You two are pretty sharp, that is a good point. When I heard about the Mnemonic Visual, at first I didn't realize that limitation. I'll remember to ask the staff at RATH before going into the next long Diving experiment, but as it involves the core of STL technology, I don't think they will agree to answer…… But, there is one thing…… in the explanation about the virtual world which comprises of memories, the staff never mentioned that those memories are from the Diver."

"Eh….. then how did they……"

As Shino couldn't grasp the meaning right away, Asuna, who was next to her, inhaled slightly.

"Could it be…… other people's memories? No…… could it possibly be that the memories did not belong to anyone but were created from zero……?"

Upon hearing the words which were almost like a whisper, Shino finally realized it.

What if the optic memory information…… the Mnemonic Visual of humans have a common structure? And the analysis of that structure is already complete……? It could be possible in theory to create a real «Dream» which is full of things one has never seen, food one has never tasted, scenes one has never imagined.

Then, the words which supported her thoughts coincidentally spilled out of Kazuto's mouth,

"……I had been doing this part-time job with RATH for two months now…… During the first test Dive, there was no memory restriction yet, so I still remember the VR world back then. One of them was just a wide room with plenty of cats, which probably numbered in the hundreds."

"……Plenty……"

Shino's mouth slacked as she imagined the cat heaven, before quickly brushing it off. As he looked straight ahead, Kazuto said with an expression as if he was searching his memories.

"……What I could recall about that room, was that it was full of breeds of cats I didn't know. And it wasn't just that…… there were some which grew wings and were flying, some which curled themselves up and bounced around. Something like that can't possibly be from my memories."

"……And at the same time, it can't be from another person's memories either, right? Since a cat with wings doesn't exist in reality anyway."

Was what Asuna said, before she continued,

"Those flying cats which the staff there made Kirito-kun see…… must be something the STL system created from zero, right?"

"The latter part is great. If that's possible, then it's not just an individual object, but it could be possible to ultimately create an entire world."

Kazuto's words made all three remain silent for a short moment.

Producing a virtual world without human involvement——

This idea caused Shino chest to throb. As Shino recalled that she had recently become increasingly uncomfortable with the «Egocentric designed» VRMMO worlds such as GGO and ALO.

The existing VR game worlds were completely assembled by the designers of the companies developing those games. Even though the buildings or trees or rivers existed in a nonchalant manner, they were actually objects placed on the terrain based on someone's preference.

During game play, whenever she thought about this, something always rose within Shino's chest. After all, she too, was merely an existence running around the developer's palm, the so-called God, and this thought remained in her mind whether she liked it or not.

As Shino didn't originally start playing Gun Gale Online for fun, now that she had overcome the curse from her past, she started to think about the meaning of her experience within virtual space in reality. She didn't seem to sympathize with someone from her squadron who carried a model gun in real life while wearing a cloth decorated with matching insignia. She believed that the fortitude and self control attached to the in-game Sinon would slowly strengthen Asada Shino in the real world as well, but at the

same time, she wondered if it was worth continuing spending that amount of time and money on Diving into the virtual world.

Shino thought that there must be a reason that her intensely shy self had met and became good friends with Asuna for several months now. This girl, who always gave off a gentle smile, must surely have had the same self values as Shino. Playing VRMMO games not to escape, but to obtain the experience and bonds from the virtual world to nourish her reality's self, Asuna was surely that kind of person. Of course, that also applied to Kazuto.

Because of that, Shino didn't want to think that the VR world was just a fake, that everything inside was just imaginary. She didn't want to think about the fact that the VR world couldn't exist without the developer.

Last month, on the night she had spent over at Asuna's house, in the room after the lights had been turned off, she had expressed the weakness she had hid. Then, Asuna who was lying on the bed beside her had thought for a moment, before speaking,

『Sinonon, isn't that the same as the real world? Even now, the surroundings granted to us, be it houses, or towns, or the status of being a student in society, everything is someone's design, isn't it……? Perhaps, being strong, is about advancing along this, don't you think?』

After taking a brief pause, Asuna continued with a laughing voice,

『But, I just want to see it once, a VR world which isn't designed by anyone. Perhaps if that became reality, it may be, in a sense, the «Real World», even more real than this real world……』

"Real… World……"

As Shino unconsciously murmured, Asuna, who was apparently thinking the same thing, nodded from the opposite side of the table.

"Kirito-kun…… then, that means…… by using STL, a reality which is subjectively more real than our real world could be created? A different world without a designer's involvement?"

"Hmmm……"

Kazuto thought slightly, before slowly shaking his head.

"No…… in the current situation, it's still difficult. The forests or grass in the natural terrain could be left to the system to generate, but I think building a large-scale town while maintaining its integrity without a designer is still impossible. About the other possibility…… such as preparing a few hundred test players and letting them build a town from zero in the wilderness field state, or in the other words, building a civilization, for that, I think it could be possible in the world without a god-like creator……"

"Uwa, that would be a very time consuming strategy–"

"The completion of the map would take several months, I think."

Asuna and Shino laughed at Kazuto's joke at the same time. However, the owner of the speech remained pondering with his brow wrinkled, and before long, he started speaking in a monologue manner,

"So it's a simulation of building a civilization, huh. No…… it can be said it's necessary. If the STL's FLA function is used and allowing them to develop…… is there any restriction placed on the memories inside……?"

"STL's FL…… what is that?"

Shino frowned at the succession of abbreviations, as Kazuto lifted his face and blinked.

"Ah…… it's Soul Translator's second magic. Just now, I talked about the dream-like virtual world created by STL, right?"

"Yeah."

"Have you ever had an incredibly long dream, and felt very tired when you woke up? A bad dream in particular……"

"Ah–, yes I have."

Shino nodded while frowning.

"Running away from something, and along the way I think 'This must be a dream' yet I am unable to wake up. When thinking that I have finally woken up after being chased for so long, it turns out that that was a dream too."

"How much time do you think you spend in those dreams?"

"Eh–? Two…… or perhaps three hours."

"Well, when monitoring the brain waves during the dream, which a person feels was very long, the actual time between seeing the dream and opening the eyes is only a few minutes."

Kazuto, who cut off his words at that point, suddenly stretched his hands to cover both the mobile terminals lying on the table. He then cast his mischievous gaze toward Shino.

"We started talking about STL around half past four, right? Sinon, what time do you think it is right now?"

"Hmm……"

Caught by surprise, Shino hesitated to answer. The sky past the summer solstice was still bright, so she couldn't tell the time by the light shining through the window. She was forced to rely on guessing an answer,

"……Around four fifty……?

Kazuto then uncovered the terminals, before directing the screen at Shino. As she peered at the screen, several digital figures indicated that it was already long past five.

"Whoa, I didn't notice we had spent this much time talking."

"The sense of time is a subjective matter. It's not just during a dream but also in the real world. When in an emergency, adrenaline that rushes out makes time feel slower, on the other hand, the time passes faster when we are absorbed in a relaxing talk. RATH has been researching about how this happens in the human's consciousness…… or Fluctlight, and has came up with a rough theory. Apparently, flowing at the core of the consciousness is the pulse that acts as a «Thought clock control signal». But it seems they are still unable to understand where it comes from."

"Clock……?"

"It's what you hear often when talking about computer's something-gigahertz."

"The number of calculations it can do in one second, right?"

Asuna said as she nodded, Kazuto then knocked the table surface with his right hand's finger, making a ton ton sound.

"That is also the max number they put in the catalogue, it actually isn't constant. It usually operates slowly in order to generate less heat, then when a heavy workload is requested――"

Ton ton ton, as he sped up the rhythm.

"As the operation clock is increased, so does the calculation speed. It is the same as the quantum computer in the form of Fluctlight. Placed in an emergency state, having to deal with large amounts of data, the thought clock would be accelerated to cope with it. Sinon surely has experienced it too, when concentrating during an intense battle, you felt like you could see the bullets, right?"

"Ah–, well…yeah, when I am in a very good condition. But there is no way I could imitate your «Predicting the bullet's trajectory then avoiding it»"

Shino said as she pouted, Kazuto gave a bitter smile before shaking his head.

"That's also impossible for me now. I need to retrain before the next BoB…… Anyway, that thought clock affects our sense of time. When the clock is accelerated, a human would feel that the flow of time is slower. The moments during sleep would be an obvious example of it. In order to deal with the large amount of memory data, the Fluctlight is sped up, and as a result, we see a dream which feels several hours long within several minutes."

"Hmmmm……"

Shino folded her arms as she groaned. Her brain, or rather her mind, was a light based computer, something like that was beyond common sense, an act of «Thinking» could increase or decrease its speed, even it was said so, she couldn't feel like it could possibly be done. However, Kazuto grinned as he continued,

"――In this case. If we could do a work or homework in our dream, don't you think it'd be great? Even it is just a several minutes in the real world, but it would be several hours in the dream."

"S-Something like that is absurd."

"Yes, I think so–, I haven't seen such a convenient dream before."

Even though Shino and Asuna both objected at the same time, the smile remained on Kazuto's face as he continued explaining,

"The real dream is inconsistent, that is the by-product of the memory processing operation. The dream which is created by STL is much clearer…… I mean, the VR world resembles the dream in that logic. In that world, the thought clock in the consciousness is interfered and accelerated. At the same time, the standard time inside the virtual world is also accelerated in sync. As a result, the Dive time that a user feels in the virtual world is several times over the actual time in reality. That is the STL's greatest killer feature, the «Fluctlight Acceleration», abbreviated as FLA."

"……This is already……"

I don't think we're talking about reality anymore, as Shino let out a little sigh. It was already far from a «Slightly different» AmuSphere.

Social life had been completely changed with just the implementation of the FullDive technology. Shino heard that the reduced cost version was used in normal companies and it had become common to go into the virtual world for a conference or presentation, there were the broadcasting of real 3D drama and movies every day, where audiences could enter into the scene from any angle they like, and a traveling software that reproduced a high altitude view was very popular among the elderly, it was as Kazuto said earlier, an era that even military training was done in the virtual world.

With the increasing number of people who didn't want to leave their houses, came the arrival of the «Strolling group» boom, which was walking aimlessly around town in the virtual world, the release of the «Virtual strolling software», which catered to that particular group had gained a big popularity, but it was a phenomenon which had its priorities backwards. And it was only recently that the major hamburger shop and the beef bowl chain started to open their virtual branches.

Where does the big tide from such a virtual world sweep to the real world —— even though it is the current social situation, with something that could accelerate the consciousness like the Soul Translator, what kind of the world would it be like? As Shino felt the chill on her back, Asuna, who frowned as she was thinking about the same thing, started muttering as she sighed,

"A long dream……hmm……"

She then raised her eyes toward Kazuto across the table and gave a faint smile.

"It'd be great if the Soul Translator was commercialized before the SAO incident…… I wondered if I should think like this. If the interface hardware wasn't Nerve Gear but STL, then Aincrad would have had like a thousand floors, and clearing it would take about twenty years."

"G……Give me a break."

Watching Kazuto tremble as he shook his head made Asuna smile again, then she continued asking,

"Then, this weekend, Kirito-kun will be seeing a continuous long dream, right?"

"Yeah. It'd be a long continuous operation testing. I'll be Diving three days straight without eating nor drinking. I think I'd get a bit thinner……"

"It's not a bit at all– Really… this work is too much."

Asuna made a cute angry face as she folded her arms in front of her chest.

"Tomorrow I'll go make food at Kawagoe! I need to ask Suguha-chan to buy a lot of vegetables too."

"T-That's very nice of you."

As Shino was smiling while watching the two, she suddenly thought of a question, and started speaking,

"Hey…… this means, your three day long Dive is done under that thought accelerated function, right? Do you know how much time you actually feel inside?"

"Hmm, as I explained earlier, the memory inside was restricted…… But, I heard that the maximum rate of the current FLA function is three times……"

"That means…… nine days?"

"Or maybe ten days."

"Hmmm…… I wonder what you have been doing in a world like that. The memories can't be taken out, but how about taking the real world memories into it? Are there any other testers?"

"No– about something like that, I don't think so. As the background knowledge would affect the test results. Also, it could block the memories during the Dive, so restricting the existing memories shouldn't be difficult…… Anyway, the building in Roppongi that I work at has only one STL experimental machine, so the one Diving was just me. And I know almost nothing about the «Inside», it's not enough to become a Beater and mess with the test results. But the only thing I could tell is the code name of the virtual world used in the experiment."

"Heh…what is it?"

"«Underworld»"

"Under…… the underground world? I wonder if it's how that VR world was designed."

"Its design is unknown whether from reality, fantasy, or SF settings. But, based on the name, I have a feeling that it'd be a gloomy underground……"

"Hmmm. So we can't pinpoint it."

As Shino and Kazuto shook their heads together, Asuna touched her delicate chin with her finger as she muttered in a low voice,

"Perhaps…… that came from Alice too."

"Alice……?"

"It makes sense since RATH's name is also taken from『Alice in Wonderland』. The first private edition of that book is『Alice's Adventures Under Ground』."

"Heh… this is the first time I heard that. If this is true, it's somehow… like a fairy tale company."

Shino gave a little smile as she continued,

"Speaking of which, about the Alice books, there are two books with stories about the long dreams. ……Perhaps during Kirito's Dive, it could be possible that he had a tea party with the rabbit or played chess with the queen."

Asuna who heard that giggling in an amused manner. But the person in question, Kazuto, stared at a single spot on the table while making a difficult face."

"……What's wrong?"

"……No……"

Shino's voice brought his gaze upward, while still frowned, he blinked repeatedly in irritation.

"Just now, when I heard Alice…… I felt like I could remember something…… Like, there are times, when you feel something funny or disturbing such as just now, but no matter how you think about it, you can't recall what it was, it's that kind of anxious feeling."

"Ah, yeah. Like waking up from a scary dream but not remembering the contents of the dream."

"Something…… Just now I felt that I had forgotten something bad……"

Asuna asked as she was worriedly looked at Kazuto, who was messing up his hair,

"That is, perhaps, the memories during the experiment……?"

"But… didn't you say all memories of the virtual world were removed?"

As Shino said that after Asuna. Kazuto groaned with his eyes still closed, before lowering his shoulders.

"……Well, it's ten days worth of memories anyway. It's possible that there might be pieces which had escaped the blocking……"

"Oh yes, if we think about it that way, if the memories actually remained, it would mean you're getting older than us, in the mind. That's somehow…… scary."

"For me, I'd be a little…… happy, it's like the gap would become narrower."

Asuna said so, as she was a year older, Kazuto responded as he gave a weak smile,

"Come to think of it, in the period between yesterday's Dive and today's class, I felt a strange discomfort. It was like it had been a very long time

since seeing the town, or the TV shows. The classmates too…… 'who's that guy again?' Something like that……"

"Don't exaggerate, it's just ten days."

"I agree– It's not something to worry about."

Shino and Asuna frowned at Kazuto's words.

"Kirito-kun, you should quit that unreasonable experiment. It really puts too much burden on your body."

"Ah, if the long continuous operation testing had succeeded, it means the top part of the fundamental design problem is all clear. The next stage is to shape up the machine for implementation, but I wonder how many years it would take to place that enormous size into a commercial basis…… I also can't do this part-time job much longer, as the final test is starting next month."

"Uu……"

At Kazuto's words, Shino made a grim face once more.

"Hey, don't remind me of something like that. You guys have it easy, there're almost no paper tests anymore. Mine are still using the mark sheet system, give me a break……"

"Huhu, then how about doing a study camp together?"

As she said that, Asuna looked at the wall up behind Shino before saying 'Wah' in a low voice.

"It's nearly six already, time surely flies while we are chatting."

"Then let's finish this. But I don't think talking about the main topic would take only five minutes though."

As Kazuto gave a bitter smile, Shino also smiled while replying,

"Well, it's still a while before the fifth BoB, so let's decide about the character build and detailed battle tactics after the conversion."

"Yeah, that works too. But I don't feel like using anything but a light saber though."

"I told you it's a photon sword."

'Is that so?' Kazuto laughed as he grabbed the slip off the table, and started walking toward the counter to treat them with the pay he had received from the seventy-two hours part-time job. Shino and Asuna said 'Thanks for the treat!' together, before heading for the exit.

"Agil-san, I'll come again later."

"Thank you for the feast, the baked beans were really delicious."

After the reply from the shopkeeper, who was busy with the nightly preparations, Shino extracted her umbrella from the whisky barrel and pushed the door open. Karakaran, as the doorbell continued ringing, the sound of the town's ruckus and rain enveloped her ears.

Even though there was still time before the nightfall, due to the thick clouds, the sign of the dark night had already hung over the damp street nearby. Shino opened the umbrella, and began descending the small stairs —— she abruptly stopped her feet as she quickly moved her eyes through the surroundings.

"Sinonon, what's the matter……?"

The wondering voice of Asuna came from behind. Shino came to her senses and hurriedly turned around from the street.

"N-No, it's nothing."

She gave a short laugh to hide her embarrassment. It can't be, I felt the presence of a sniper on my nape, but it's not possible. Maybe the habit of affirming the sniping points the moment I entered an open space had come out to the real world? by thinking so, she became slightly astonished.

As Asuna still tilted her head, the doorbell from behind rang once again, followed by the sound of footsteps descending the stairs.

When Kazuto, who exited the shop while putting his wallet into his bag, had come down and stood on the street, he let out a single word along with his sigh,

"ALICE……"

"What, you're still thinking about it?"

"No…… I recalled what I heard by chance from the staff's conversation on Friday before Diving in STL…… A, L, I…… Arti…… Labile…… Intelligen…… hmm, what was it……"

Shino held her umbrella over Kazuto, who was grumbling the words she couldn't get the point, Asuna sure has a lot to worry about, as she gave a bitter smile.

"Really, if something like that distracted you so much. Shouldn't you just ask them the next time you go there?"

"Well…… that's true."

Kazuto shook his head two, three more times, before finally opening his umbrella.

"See you Sinon, the next meeting we'll talk about converting to GGO."

"Understood. It's fine to meet in ALO next time. Thanks for coming out today."

"See you, Sinonon."

"See you, Asuna."

Kazuto and Asuna, who were going back with JR, waved their hands, Shino then started walking to the subway station in the opposite direction.

Once more, she secretly looked over her surroundings from under the umbrella, but the eerie feeling of the glance from earlier had also disappeared without a trace like the first time.

Interlude I

The human temperature is a strange thing.

Yuuki Asuna suddenly had such a thought.

The rain had already stopped, and under that dark blue sky, with a part of the clouds dyed in orange, the two of them walked slowly while holding hands. Beside her, Kirigaya Kazuto, who had a sullen expression ever since he had started thinking about something several minutes ago, dropped his gaze to the brick tile footpath without saying anything.

Asuna who lived in Setagaya and Kazuto who was going back to Kawagoe, usually separated at the Shinjuku station as they had to take different trains, however today, for some reason, Kazuto said "I'll drop you near your house." Even though he would have to take an hour longer to get back to his home from Shibuya, as Kazuto had an unusual look in his eyes, Asuna nodded obediently.

As they got off the train at the Miyanosaka station on the Setagaya line, which was the station nearest to Asuna's house, they were still holding hands.

While doing this, Asuna vaguely recalled a scene. It wasn't just sweet, but also horribly painful at the same time, so it was a memory which normally didn't appear in her consciousness, however, it came back occasionally whenever she held Kazuto's hands.

It wasn't a memory of the real world, but of the town of iron towers «Grandum» on Aincrad's 55th floor, which no longer existed.

At that time, Asuna had served as the sub-leader of the guild Knights of the Blood. Her escort was a great sword user named Kuradeel, who accompanied her all the time. Kuradeel, who had an abnormal burning obsession with Asuna, had used a paralysis poison on Kazuto/Kirito, which compelled Asuna to withdraw from the guild.

Kuradeel had killed two guild members in the process; Asuna, who got there just in time before Kirito's life was lost, drew her rapier with fury and mercilessly, Kuradeel's HP gauge was reduced to a level where it could have been depleted with just a final strike, but she had hesitated. Kuradeel took that chance to retaliate however Kirito had recovered from the paralysis by then, and he finished Kuradeel off with his bare hands.

The two then went back to the headquarters of the Knights of the Blood on the 55th floor. After informing them about her withdrawal from the guild, they held each other's hands while walking aimlessly in Grandum.

While she remained calm on the surface at that time, inside Asuna's chest, she had felt disappointed in herself because she didn't kill Kuradeel. The guilt from having Kirito carry that heavy burden swirled around her. She felt that she wasn't qualified to call herself a part of the clearing group, that she had no right to stand beside Kirito. But, as she was suffering from these feelings, she heard a voice. Just you, I want to send you back to the real world no matter what.

At that moment, a strong feeling welled up within Asuna. Next time I'll protect this person with my own hands. No, not just the next time, but every time. No matter in which world.

Asuna could vividly remember that her hand, which had felt nothing but the coldness of the air even though they were still grasping Kirito's, at that moment, became warm as if they were sitting by a fireplace. After the floating castle collapsed, going through the world of fairies, and returning to the real world, when she held his hand, she could still recall the warmth felt in her palm from that time.

Really, the human temperature is a strange thing. Even though she knew that heat was generated from energy consumption to maintain bodily functions, the exchange of warmth from the contact of their palms felt like it contained some information as well. Because, Asuna could understand what Kazuto, who had been walking in silence until now, had been hesitating to say.

'A human's soul is light quanta contained within the microscopic structures of their brain cells' was what Kazuto had said. But, that light might exist not just in the brain cells, but also in every cell in the body. The quantum field, which was composed of those particles of fluctuating lights and produced the human form, had connected through their palms. Perhaps that was how the warmness could be felt.

Asuna closed her eyelids gently, before whispering in her mind,

——Look, it's alright, Kirito-kun. I will always guard your back. That's because we're the world's greatest forward and backup.

Kazuto then suddenly stopped, prompting Asuna to also halt her moving feet. Her eyes widened, Is it already seven? as the antique cast iron street lamp radiated an orange light overhead.

In this evening after the rain, no one was to be seen on the walkway aside from the two of them. Kazuto slowly turned his head, his dark pupils fixed on Asuna.

"Asuna……"

As if he finally shook off his hesitation, he took a step forward——

"……I still think about going."

Asuna, who understood the reason for his concern, smiled as she asked,

"America?"

"Yeah. I spent a year researching, and I think the «Brain Implant Chip» research at Santa Clara University is the real successor of the FullDive technology. The Brain Machine Interface is probably heading toward that direction. I really want to see it, where the next world is born."

Asuna looked straight into Kazuto's pupils before giving a deep nod.

"There were not only fun memories, but a lot of sad and painful memories too. Its purpose, that castle's destination, you want to know about those, right?"

"……I don't think even several hundreds of years would be enough time to understand it."

Kazuto made a little smile and became silent once again.

It's certainly difficult to speak about separation. was what Asuna guessed. Without erasing her smile, she tried to voice the answer that had always been kept warm inside of her chest —— however before she could do so, Kazuto made the exact same expression he once did in Aincrad - the same one from when he proposed marriage to her - as he said while stuttering,

"That's why…… I-I want you to go with me, Asuna. I really don't want to live without you. I know I'm saying something unreasonable. I know that Asuna has a path Asuna wants to go. But, even so, I……"

At that point, he cut off his words as if he was confused. Asuna's eyes widened, and she let out a light laugh.

"Eh……?"

"S……Sorry that I laughed. But…… could it be, that was what made Kirito-kun troubled until now?"

"Y-Yeah."

"Whaaat. If it's about my answer, I had already decided upon it long ago."

Her left hand grasped her right, which was still holding Kazuto's hand. After nodding deeply again, she told him,

"Of course, I'll go… we'll go together. If it's with you, I can go anywhere."

Kazuto's eyes opened wide as he blinked many times, and then a rare bright smile floated onto his face. At the same time, he placed his right hand on Asuna's shoulder.

Asuna responded by tightly embracing Kazuto with both hands.

As their lips touched, the coldness immediately left their lips, replaced by a loving warmth; Asuna, once again, sensed the exchange of information through the infinite amount of radiance that comprised each other's souls. Even in the future, no matter in which world, no matter how long we travel, our hearts won't be separated, about that I'm certain.

No, our hearts were actually bound a long time ago. On the sky above the collapsing Aincrad, when it disappeared wrapped in that rainbow aurora —— or perhaps even far before that, the moment we met deep within the dark labyrinth, as fellow lonely solo players.

"Anyways."

Several minutes later, as they were walking along the walkway holding hands, Asuna asked a question that suddenly popped into her head,

"So you think that the Soul Translator you're experimenting with isn't the successor of the FullDive technology? The Brain Chip interfaces with brain cells at the same level as the Nerve Gear, but STL is ahead of that, and interfaces at the quantum level, doesn't it?"

"Hmmm……"

Kazuto was diligently poking the brick using the metallic ferrule of the umbrella in his other hand as he answered,

"……Its design concept is certainly more advanced than the Brain Chip. But, how to say it…… maybe it's too advanced. In order to downsize that machine for practical use, it wouldn't just take a few years, but it would require decades to do so. I have a feeling that the current STL isn't a machine made for humans to FullDive into the virtual world with……"

"Ehh? Then what is it for?"

"Maybe it's a machine for understanding the human consciousness…… the Fluctlight."

"Hmm……"

So you mean the STL isn't the goal, but the method? As Asuna was wondering what the understanding of the human soul could lead to, Kazuto continued speaking,

"Besides. I think STL is his…… the extension of Heathcliff's idea. That man, for whatever reason he created Nerve Gear, he sacrificed thousands of people, fried his own brain, and on top of that, he even spread «The Seed» out into the world…… I don't know if he even had a goal in the first place, but I feel that his presence is floating somewhere in STL. Even though I want to know what he was aiming for, I don't want it to affect my own direction. I don't want to feel like I'm dancing on his palm."

The face of that person appeared in the back of Asuna's brain in that instant, and she nodded.

"……I see…… ……Hey, the consciousness of Guild Leader, the thought emulation program still exists somewhere on a server, right? Like Kirito-kun mentioned before."

"Yeah, but it was just once. The machine that the guy used for suicide was the original prototype of STL. In order to read the Fluctlight, it required a high-powered beam that was enough to fry the brain cells. Perhaps, he had to suffer a much more intense and long continuous pain than when only the brain stem is destroyed by the Nerve Gear…… For the purpose of making a copy of himself, I don't think it's unrelated to what RATH is doing with STL now. Maybe somewhere in my heart I'm still thinking…… that I want to see some kind of resolution, which is why I accepted Kikuoka's offer……"

As he said that, Kazuto's gaze turned toward the sky fading into a reddish orange. As she looked at his face for a while, Asuna put more strength into her hand that was holding his, before whispering,

"……Promise me, just one thing. Don't do something dangerous."

Kazuto, who turned to her, gave a smile as he nodded deeply.

"Of course, I promise. As I'm going to America with Asuna next summer anyways."

"Before that, shouldn't you worry about studying to get a good score on the Scholastic Assessment Test?"

"Uu……"

Kazuto was at a loss for words momentarily, before he lightly coughed and changed the topic,

"Anyway, I need to properly greet Asuna's parents first. I have exchanged emails with Shouzou-shi from time to time, but your mother's memory of me is quite bad……"

"No problem, no problem, recently she has become very understanding. Ah, yes…… why not just go now?"

"Ehh!? N-No…… maybe it's better to go after the final exam, yeah."

"Really…"

They had arrived in front of a small park near Asuna's house as they talked. This was where Kazuto usually said farewell before sending her off. Asuna stopped as she felt reluctant before turning around. She looked at Kazuto's face, and his gaze was also fixed on her.

The gap between them then lessened to fifteen centimeters. Suddenly, heavy footsteps could be heard from behind, and Asuna reflexively stepped back.

As she turned her head, a human figure appeared jogging from the T-shaped road. It was a short man dressed in black. His gaze stopped at Asuna and Kirito before saying "Excuse me," with a high-pitched voice.

"Erm, do you know where the station is?"

The young man lowered his head as he asked, Asuna then pointed to the east with her left hand.

"Follow this road for a while, and turn right at the first traffic light…… then…"

Suddenly, Kazuto, who was behind, forcefully pulled back Asuna's shoulder. Then he stepped forward while shielding Asuna behind his back.

"W-What's……"

"You…… were following us from Dicey Café weren't you? Who are you?"

With a sharp tone, Kazuto said something that Asuna didn't even notice. She held her breath as she looked at the man's face again.

He had an uneven tangle of long hair. The outline of his thin cheeks were densely covered by a stubbly beard. There were silver earrings on his ears, and on his neck was also a thick silver necklace. He was wearing a discolored black T-shirt with the same colored leather pants. A metal chain hanging on his waist made a jingling sound. His feet were wrapped in high laced boots which looked heavy in this season, and he gave off a shabby overall impression.

The narrowed eyes gleamed from the parting in his untidy forelock, as if he was smiling. The guy frowned and tilted his head as if he didn't understand what Kazuto was talking about —— then suddenly, his small pupils shone with an unpleasant light.

"……So surprise attacks don't work, huh."

With the edge of his lips tightly bent, Asuna didn't know if he was smiling or irritated.

"Just who are you?"

Kazuto repeated his question. The man shrugged, shook his head two, three times, before he deliberately heaved a big sigh.

"Hey, hey, that won't do, Kirito-san. Did you already forget my face…… oh, over there I wore a mask, didn't I? But… I never forget about you for even a single day."

"You……"

Tension built up on Kazuto's back. He pulled back his right hand as he lowered his waist slightly.

"——«Johnny Black»!"

With his low shout, Kazuto's right hand flashed like lightning and grabbed the air over his shoulder. It was once where the «Black Swordsman»'s beloved sword, «Elucidator» was.

"Bu… Ku… Kuhahahahahaha! Nope, no sword!!"

The man who was called Johnny Black twisted the upper part of his body as he spewed out a high-pitched laugh. Kazuto lowered his right hand as his entire body remained tense.

Asuna knew that name. It was the name of an active murderer in the old Aincrad, a well-known name even among the red players. Belonging to the PK guild «Laughing Coffin» and forming a duo with «Red-eyed XaXa», who required more than ten players to capture.

……XaXa. She heard that name just half a year ago. The mastermind behind that terrible «Death Gun Incident».

She heard right after the incident that XaXa himself, Shinkawa Shouichi was arrested along with his younger brother, but the remaining comrade was on the run. The third person, whom she thought was caught long ago, his name was probably Kanemoto…… in other words, the man standing in front of her was————

"You…… still keep running away?"

Kazuto said in a hoarse voice. Johnny Black, Kanemoto grinned as he protruded both his index fingers.

"Of cour——se. Did you think I'd give up after XaXa was caught? I am the last of the Laughing Coffin. I discovered that coffee shop five months ago, and I was on the lookout nearby for a month…… every day was filled with hatred—"

As he spoke, Kanemoto inclined his head to the left and right.

"But, Kirito-san, without the sword…… you're merely a weak brat, aren't you? Even though the face is the same, it's hard to think you're the same Swordsman-sama who beat me up so badly."

"It's the same for you…… What can you do without your proud poisoned weapons?"

"Hey, that's so unprofessional to judge an armament by its appearance."

Kanemoto moved his right hand behind his back with a snake-like speed, and pulled something off his shirt.

It was a strange object. From the cylinder made of smooth plastic, there was a toy-like grip protruding out. Asuna thought it was a water gun for a moment, but she held her breath as she saw Kazuto's back became intensely stiff. Her confusion turned into fear once she heard Kazuto's voice.

"That's…… the «Death Gun»……!"

His right hand projected to the back, encouraging Asuna to withdraw. At the same time, he pointed the tip of the folded umbrella in his left hand at Kanemoto.

One step, two steps, as she unconsciously moved backward, Asuna eyes were still fixed on the plastic «Gun». That was not a mere water gun, but a syringe utilizing a high-pressure gas, inside of which was with the frightening chemical which could stop the heart.

"I have—, I have the poisoned weapon— I'm sorry it's not a knife though—"

As he was shaking the tip of the syringe, which was its only metal part, Kanemoto made a creaking-like laugh. Kazuto grabbed the umbrella with both his hands while directing it cautiously towards Kanemoto, then called out in a low voice.

"Asuna, run away! Call someone for help!"

After a moment of hesitation, Asuna nodded, then turned around and started running. From behind, the voice of Kanemoto could be heard,

"Oi, «The Flash»! Make sure to let everyone know….. that the one who took the «Black Swordsman»'s neck, is this Johnny Black!"

The doorbell of the nearest house was about thirty meters away.

"Someone…… help!!"

As she ran and called with her utmost voice. Isn't this a mistake to leave Kazuto and run away? ……If we both jumped on him at the same time, shouldn't we able to suppress that weapon? She passed the halfway point as she thought so, at that time, a sound reached her ears.

Like when the cap of a carbonated drink was opened, or a can of hair spray was used; a short, sharp compression sound. Yet, she understood its meaning right away; Asuna, overwhelmed with fear, twisted her foot, staggered, and leaned her hand against the damp brick.

Asuna slowly turned and looked over her shoulder.

A gruesome scene entered her vision.

The shaft of the umbrella in Kazuto's hand had stabbed into the base of Kanemoto's right thigh.

And the syringe in Kanemoto hand was pushed against Kazuto's left shoulder.

Together, their bodies separated from each other, before collapsing violently onto the road.

The several minutes after that was unreal, like she was watching a black and white movie.

She ran up to the side of the unmoving body of Kazuto. She pulled Kazuto off Kanemoto, who was holding his right leg in agony, "Hang in there," she was calling as she pulled out the mobile terminal from her pocket and opened it.

She couldn't feel anything from her fingers, as if they were frozen. Her stiff fingertips desperately operated the touch panel, and she reported the current location and situation to the operator of the emergency center, panting and out of breath.

Curious spectators gathered. Then, a policeman appeared from a crack in the crowd. Asuna just briefly answered his questions as she kept on tightly hugging Kazuto.

Kazuto's breath was short, and shallow. Under his pained breath, he whispered two short words. "Asuna, sorry."

The next several minutes felt like an eternity. Kazuto was brought into one of the two ambulances which had arrived, and Asuna also boarded the same car.

As Kazuto lay unconscious on the stretcher, a paramedic put his face close to Kazuto's mouth to check his airway, then immediately called the other rescue member,

"Respiratory failure! Give me the Ambu bag!"

To hastily support his breathing, Kazuto's mouth and nose were covered with a transparent mask.

Asuna somehow managed to suppress her urge to scream within her throat, as she informed the paramedic about the name of the chemical she miraculously recalled,

"Erm, s-succinylcholine…… he was injected with that drug. In the left shoulder."

The paramedic looked at her in amazement for a moment, then he gave new instructions in rapid succession.

"IV inject epinephrine…… no, use atropine! Make sure it's IV!"

A transfusion needle was put into the left arm of Kazuto, who had his shirt taken off, the electrodes of the ECG monitor were placed on his chest. In addition to the voices fluttering about, a siren ripped the air apart.

"Heart rate is dropping!"

"Start chest compressions!"

The face of Kazuto, with his eyelids shut, looked terribly pale under the car's internal LED light. "No… no… Kirito-kun… not something like this…" the small voice continued to spill out of Asuna's mouth without her noticing for a while.

"Heart stopped!"

"Keep compressing!"

Kirito-kun, it's a lie, right? You aren't going to leave me, right? You said we'll be together forever…… didn't you say that?

Asuna dropped her gaze to the mobile terminal held firmly in her hand.

The pink heart displayed on the monitor throbbed slightly once, before it stopped pulsing.

The digital figure cruelly changed and stayed at zero, as everything became silent.

Chapter 1 - Underworld

(The Third Month of Human World Calendar 378)

Part 1

There were scents in the air.

My fragmented thought had sensed as such just before I woke up.

The air which was flowing into my nasal cavity contained large amounts of information. The sweet scent of flowers. The scent of bright green grasses. The refreshing scent of trees which felt like it could cleanse my chest. The scent of water which stimulated my thirsty throat.

As my consciousness leaned towards awareness, the flood of the sounds information surged into me. The sound of numerous leaves rubbing against each other. The sound of small birds cheerfully twittering away. Below them were the occasionally buzzing sounds from the insects. The faint murmuring sound of a small river from far away.

Where am I? At least it is obviously not my room. Usually, when I wake up, there is always a sunny-like scent of the dry sheet, the groan of the air-con, and the sound of the cars running on the Kawagoe bypass slightly further away, but all of these aren't present. Furthermore —— the green light which irregularly brushes my closed eyelids until now isn't the book light I forgot to turn off, but sunlight filtered through the foliage, isn't it?

I pushed aside the desire to return to the deep sleep which still lingered, before finally opening my eyes.

I repeatedly blinked several times due to the sudden shot of numerous swaying beams of lights. As I rubbed my eyes, which were blurred with tears, with the back of my right hand, I slowly raised my upper body.

"……Where am I……?"

I unintentionally muttered.

What I saw next were green bushes. There were small white and yellow flowers at various places on them, the shiny light blue butterflies were flying back and forth between them. About five meters away, the carpet of grasses was cut off, from there on, was a stretch of deep forest, lined up with the huge gnarly trees which should have aged for tens of years.

As I focused my sight to the gloomy gap between the tree trunks, the grove of trees seemed to continue until the limit where light could reach. The rugged rippled tree bark and the ground were covered with thick moss, shining green and gold under the sun.

I glanced to the right, then turned around, I was greeted by old tree trunks from all directions. In other words, it seemed I was lying in a small circle of grasses in the opening of the forest. Lastly I looked upwards, and from the gap between the gnarled tree-tops stretching in all directions, it was the blue sky where the scattered clouds were drifting, like I had expected.

"Where is…… this place?"

I muttered again as I sighed. But there was no answer.

I searched every nook and corner of my head, but I couldn't find the memory of how I came to take a nap in this place. Sleepwalking? Amnesia? As those dangerous words crossed my mind, no way, I quickly denied it.

I am…… my name is Kirigaya Kazuto. Seventeen years old and eight months. I live at Kawagoe, Saitama prefecture with my mother and little sister.

I felt somewhat calm as my related data came out smoothly, then I pulled out more memories.

Currently, I'm a second year high school student. But as I'd met the graduation requirement in the first semester of next year, I was thinking about entering a university in fall. Yes, I had consulted with someone about that. On the last Sunday of June, when it was raining. I went to Agil's shop, «Dicey Café» in Okachimachi after school, and talked to my friend Sinon, Asada Shino about Gun Gale Online.

Then, Asuna —— Yuuki Asuna joined up, the three of us talked for a while before leaving the shop.

"Asuna……"

I have a lover, I softly uttered a name of the girl, who was the partner I could leave my back to with full confidence. I looked around my surroundings many times, tried to search for the figure of her, who existed clearly in my memory, however, I couldn't find a single human's figure on the grass floor or in the deep forest.

While fighting with a sudden strike of loneliness, I went to retrace my memories.

Asuna and I separated from Shino after we went out of the shop. After coming out of the Tokyo Metro Ginza Line in Shibuya, we switched to Tōyoko line to go Setagaya, where Asuna's house is.

The rain had already stopped when we exited the station. As we walked side by side on the brick tile footpath, we talked about entering the university. I spoke openly about my desire to go to the university in America, and made an unreasonable request for Asuna to come along, at that point, she gave her usual tenderly bright smile, and then——

My memories stopped at that point.

I couldn't recall it. How did Asuna reply? How did I say farewell and return to the station? What time did I come back home, what time did I go to bed? I couldn't recall any of those.

As I was slightly amazed, I desperately tried to pull out more memories.

However, Asuna's smile just faded away like it was blurred in the water, the scene after that didn't come out no matter how hard I tried to recall it. I frowned as I closed my eyes, and hastily dug up the gloomy grey vacuum.

I was suffocating as if I was going mad.

Those were just two images that came to mind, like small bubbles. Unintentionally, I inhaled the sweet air deeply into my chest. And I strongly sensed my dry throat, which I had forgotten about until now.

There is no doubt about it, yesterday evening I was definitely at Miyasaka town in Setagaya ward. Then how did I end up sleeping in the middle of a forest I don't know?

No, was it really yesterday? The breeze which is brushing against my skin feels cool and pleasant. This forest doesn't have the slightest bit of the humidity at the end of June. This time, a genuine fear ran through my back.

The «Yesterday's memory», which I'm desperately clinging onto as if it were a small float floating in the middle of a stormy sea, did it really happen? Am I… really who I think I am……?

After caressing my face and pulling at my hair several times, I lowered my hands and looked at its details. I calmed down slightly as they looked just like what I had in my memories, there was a mole at the base of the right thumb, the back of the left middle finger had a scar which I got during childhood.

At that point, I finally noticed my strange appearance.

Replacing my usual pajamas wasn't a T-shirt nor a school uniform, no, it wasn't even anything I owned. On the contrary, no matter how I looked at it, I didn't think it was ready-made clothes available in the market.

The tunic was dyed in a pale blue, it was either a rough cotton or flax short sleeved shirt. Its texture was irregular, which gave a coarse feeling. The thread sewed on the cuffs seemed to be hand-sewn rather than machine sewed. There was no collar, the V shape cut on the chest was tied with a light brown cord. As I looked at the cord held by my fingers, I could see that it wasn't made of braided fiber, but seemed to be of finely cut leather.

The trousers also used the same material, but they were in beige as they seemed to be unbleached. There was no pocket, the leather belt which tied my waist wasn't fastened with a metal buckle, but a long and narrow wooden button. The shoes were also hand-sewn leather, several tacks were struck to the cleats of thick leather shoe sole.

I had never seen such clothes and shoes before. ——In the real world, that was.

"……What."

I relaxed my shoulders, as I muttered with a light sigh.

Even though they were completely different, at the same time, they were the garments that looked familiar. From Europe during the Middle Ages, or it could be said from fantasy, these were what were the so-called tunic, cotton pants, and leather shoes. This place wasn't reality but a fantasy world, or a virtual world I was familiar with.

"What……"

I said again as I tilted my head.

This means I was sleeping while FullDiving? But when and what game did I log in to? Why can't I remember anything?

Anyway, I'll know after I logged out, as I thought that, I waved my right hand.

After a several seconds, the window wouldn't open, so this time I waved my left hand. The result was the same.

As I listened to the uninterrupted sound of little birds twittering and leaves rubbing against each other, I recklessly tried to shake off a discomforting feeling which was creeping up from my waist.

This place is a virtual world. It should be. But —— at least it isn't Alfheim I'm familiar with. Before that, it isn't even the standard VR world which is created by The Seed.

But didn't I just confirm the mole and scar I have in the real world? A VR game which could precisely reproduce such things, as far as I know, doesn't exist.

"Command. ……Log out."

I pronounced it along with a faint glimmer of hope, but there was no response. As I sat cross-legged, I looked at my hand again.

There were swirled fingerprints on the tip of my fingers. There were wrinkles at the joints. The fine soft hairs grew thinly. The beads of cold sweat had been perspiring for a while now.

I wiped them off using my tunic, and checked the details of the fabric again. The rough threads were knit into the cloth using an old method. The fluffy and very fine fiber was clearly visible on the surface.

If this was a virtual world, the machine which created it would have a fearfully high performance. As I set my gaze on the grove of trees up ahead, I quickly tore a blade of grass with my right arm and held it in front of my eyes.

The Seed's standard VR world, which used «Detail Focusing» technique, wouldn't be able to keep up with my sudden movement, a slight time lag would occur before I could see the fine detailed texture of the grass. However, from the thin running vein and the jagged edge, until the water droplet dripped off the slit, all were presented in ultra-fine detail the moment I stared at it.

It means the objects which entered my vision is generated in real-time with a precision of millimeters. Then the capacity needed to store this single

grass would be in several tens of megabytes. Is something like that really possible?

I don't want to pursue this anymore, I suppressed such thoughts within my mind as I pushed the grass between my feet aside and started digging the ground using my right hand in place of a shovel.

The damp black soil was surprisingly soft, the entangled small grassroots entered my eyes immediately. I saw a wriggling movement between the tangle of roots and gently picked it up with my fingertips.

It was a small earthworm, about three centimeters long. The lustrous green creature, which was pulled out from its safe haven, was struggling recklessly. Is this a new species? right as I thought that, it raised one end of the tip, which apparently was its head, and made a small Kyu— kyu— cry. While I was feeling dizzy, I returned it to the top of the dug up soil. I then looked at my right hand, my palm was covered in black dirt, the gaps of my fingernails were full of the fine soil.

I was absentminded for several tens of seconds, then, while being reluctant, I came up with three hypotheses which could sufficiently explain the current situation.

First, it is possible that this place is a virtual world created by an extension of the current FullDive technology. The situation in which I woke up in the middle of the forest, is a standard fantasy RPG starting scene.

However, in that case, no matter what kind of supercomputer I know, none of them had enough capability to generate these ultra-fine detailed 3D objects. It could be said that I have lost part of my memories and the time in reality had already passed by several years, or several tens of years.

Next, the possibility that this place could be somewhere in the real world. It means I am the subject of a crime, an illegal experiment, or a terrible prank, someone dressed me up in these clothes and threw me out in the forest somewhere —— from this weather it could be Hokkaidō, or perhaps somewhere on the southern hemisphere. However, I don't think Japan has a species of metallic green earthworms which could cry 'kyu kyu', or even any country in the whole world.

Then the last hypothesis, this place could possibly be a real different dimension, a different world, or perhaps an afterlife world. It is a familiar event which occurs in manga, novels, and anime. According to the dramaturgy of those, after this I would save a girl from monster's attack,

listen to village chief's request to become the savior hero, and fight against the devil king. But there is no «Steel sword» at my waist.

I held my belly as I was attacked by a sudden desire to burst out laughing, after I somehow managed to let it pass, I decided to exclude the third possibility as out of the question as well. As I lost sight of the border between the reality and non-reality, I felt as if I was starting to lose my sanity as well.

After all —— is this a virtual world? Or is it the real world?

If it's the former, no matter how super real the world is, it's not difficult to confirm. I just have to climb to the top of a nearby tree and jump down head-first. If I was logged out, or resurrected at a save point in a temple somewhere, then it would be a virtual world.

But if this is a real world, the worst result will come out from that experiment. In a novel I read long ago, a certain criminal organization, in order to film a real death game, abducted about ten people and left them to kill each other in an uninhabited wilderness. Even though such thing would be unthinkable to happen in reality, the same abnormal event that was the SAO incident had occurred. If this is really a game set up on a stage in the real world, I don't think committing suicide right at the start is a good choice.

"……If it's something like that, they still haven't done that yet……"

I unconsciously said that out. At least Kayaba Akihito still carried out his minimal duty, explaining fine details at the start of the game.

I looked up into sky through the treetops before speaking again,

"Oi, GM-san! If you're listening then reply to me!!"

However, no matter how long I waited, a huge face or a hooded human figure didn't appear. At that point, I started checking the surrounding bushes again before searching through my clothes for something that could be a rule book, but I couldn't find anything.

Apparently, whoever threw me out in this place has no intention to respond to my call for help. This situation, if it's not accidental then… but…

As I listened to the birds' carefree twittering, I recklessly thought about what to do after this point.

If this is an accident in reality, I have a hunch that moving around carelessly isn't a good idea. It could be possible that currently, a rescue team is already on its way.

But, what is the reason that this kind of accident happened in the first place?

If forcibly straining to get one, it could possibly be, trouble happened to the vehicle I was boarding during traveling —— be it a plane or a car, and I fell unconscious in this forest, the shock made me lose memories of the events that occurred before and after it. But that can't explain these strange clothes, and there are no scratches on my body either.

Or, an accident happened during my Dive in a virtual world, something like that is also possible. An obstacle occurred along the communication route and caused me to log into a world which was not originally connected. But in this case, there is no explanation for these high-detail objects.

Also, if assuming that it is a situation designed by someones intention. Then it would be better to think that as long as I didn't take any action, the situation wouldn't change.

"Just which one is it……"

Is this reality? Or is it VR world? There must be a method to identify it, I thought that as I muttered.

There must be a way. A virtual world which approaches perfection until one couldn't be able to distinguish it from reality, although it is a commonly used phrase, I don't think it is possible to recreate everything in the real world with a hundred percent precision.

It was close to five minutes that I sat on the short grass thinking about various things. However, I couldn't find any feasible ideas for the current situation. If I had a microscope, I could search for the existence of microorganism on the ground, or if I had a plane, I could be able to fly to the edge of the surface. However, sadly, with only the hands and feet that I had, digging the ground was the best I could do.

At a time like this, if it's Asuna, she's sure to have a way to identify this world which I didn't think of, I let out a short sigh as I thought that. Or if it was her, she wouldn't be sitting worrying like this, but quickly taking action.

I bit my lips as hopelessness struck me again.

I was surprised that I was at this much of a loss just because it wasn't possible to contact Asuna, but I also accepted this fact. As during this past two years, I discussed almost all my decisions with her. Now, without Asuna's thinking circuit, my brain was like a CPU with half of its core disabled.

It feels like only yesterday that I enjoyed talking with her at Agil's shop for several hours. If I knew this would happen, I wouldn't talk about RATH or STL, but about how to distinguish reality from the ultra-precise virtual wor——……

"Ah……"

I inadvertently raised my body. The ambient sound rapidly receded.

So that is it, and I didn't realize it until now.

Didn't I already know about it? The existence of something far beyond the FullDive machine, a technology that could be said to be able to create a VR world with a super-real quality. It means this world is……

"Inside of Soul Translator……? Is this place… Underworld……?"

There was no response to what I muttered as I unconsciously looked around my surroundings in confusion.

The forest of gnarled old trees I could only think of as the real thing. The swaying grasses. The flying butterflies.

"These are…… a man-made dream written directly into my Fluctlight……?"

On the first day I started the part-time job at the venture company, «RATH»; the researcher and operator, Higa Takeru-shi, proudly explained to me the rough structure of STL and how real the world it could create was.

And I realized by the Test Dive soon after, that his words weren't an exaggeration at all —— however, what I saw at that time was just one room. Although the table, chair and various small things placed there were hard to distinguish from the real thing, the room itself couldn't be called a «World».

However, the size of the forest which surrounds me now, perhaps it would be several kilometers in reality. No, if the ridge of the mountain range that faintly floated beyond the trees was the real thing, then the size of this

space would be at a level of several tens or several hundreds of kilometers.

Trying to create this using the existing technology, even using all the storage available on the internet wouldn't be enough to fit all the data required. Only a totally new technology…… such as the «Mnemonic Visual» of STL, would allow not only a scene that was impossible in reality, but permit this large amount of objects, I totally didn't imagine it.

Then, if my guess that this place was Underworld, the virtual world created by STL, was correct, it would be impossible to verify it no matter what action was used inside.

That was because every object existed here, no, every 'thing' here were at the same level as the real thing in my consciousness. No matter how many grass I tore, the same information as if I did it in the real world would be given to my consciousness —— my Fluctlight, so it was not theoretically possible to verify that it was a virtual existence, absolutely.

So, if STL is going for commercial use, a marker to help in identifying that it's a virtual world is absolutely needed…… I stood up as I thought that.

Although I still haven't obtained solid proof, it's better to think that this place is the Underworld. It means currently in the real world, I'm lying inside the STL experimental machine in RATH's Roppongi development office, doing a two thousand yen per hour part-time job.

"But…… isn't it strange……?"

After a brief moment of relief, I tilted my head again.

The operator, Higa certainly said that in order to prevent the contamination to the test data, the real world memories of Kirigaya Kazuto would have to be blocked. But currently, what I can't recall is just one day, from sending Asuna off until I go into STL at RATH the next day, it's far from saying blocked.

Also —— yes, since the final test is approaching, didn't I decide to quit this part-time job to have time for studying? I don't think I'm a person who easily breaks my promise with Asuna after one day because of a good hourly wage.

Moreover, from this situation, even though this is STL's test Dive, it's no doubt that some problem had occurred. I looked into the blue sky between the gaps in the treetops and shouted in a loud voice,

"Higa-san, if you're monitoring, stop the Dive for a moment! Looks like a problem has occurred!"

I stood like that, waiting for more than ten seconds.

However, the countless leaves continued swaying under the serene sunlight, the butterflies continued flapping their wings drowsily, there was no change to the scenery.

"……Uu……perhaps, this is……"

I groaned in a low voice to a certain possibility I suddenly realized.

Perhaps I have agreed to this experiment —— is that the case?

In other words, in order to obtain data about the action I would take if I was in a place where I couldn't be sure if I was in reality or a virtual world, they blocked my memory right before the Dive and threw me into a super real different world created by STL.

If that was the case, I felt like slapping my head who had easily agreed to that evil experiment. It wouldn't be wrong to say that it was shallow to think that I could effortlessly come up with an accurate and swift way to escape from this situation.

I counted the percentage of possibilities which could sufficiently explain the current situation as I folded the fingers on my right hand.

"Hmm…… the possibility of this being reality is… 3 percent. The present VR world… 7 percent. My agreement to test Dive in STL… 20 percent. A sudden accident during the Dive… 69.9999 percent……"

In my mind, I added the final 0.0001 percent possibility that I had lost into a real different world. And that was the limit I could squeeze out of my little wisdom. In order to obtain more information, I would have to brave the dangers and try to contact other humans or game players or test Divers.

So it was time to take action.

First, I want to moisten my dry throat which has protested up until now. I turned my body around on the center of the grass covered ground I was

standing on. The direction where a faint streaming sound came from, judging by the sun's location, would probably be the east.

Before I started moving, my right hand searched my back again, of course there was not a single stick there, let alone a sword. I kicked the hopelessness away as I put my right foot out, it was just in ten steps that I reached the end of the grass covered ground. I passed through the two old trees which rose as if they were natural gateposts, and stepped into the gloomy forest.

The forest floor was covered in a velvet-like thick moss, the space felt suspiciously strange. The leaves of overgrown trees obstructed almost all sunlight, it was just narrow beams of golden light that managed to reach the ground. The butterflies dancing over the grass were replaced with strange beetles which looked like dragonflies or moths, they glided soundlessly in the air. Occasionally, a sound of something from somewhere reached my ears. It was a scene I didn't think could be earth in the real world.

I walked for about fifteen minutes while praying that a hostile large animal or monster would not venture out. I felt greatly relieved when the path that had a deluge of sunlight came into view. As the sound of water became clear, I was certain that up ahead would be a river. I naturally quickened my feet while suppressing my dry throat.

The moment I rushed out of the dense forest, separated by a three meter wide area of grass, was the surface of water, in which the silver light of the sun bounced off and entered my eyes.

"W-Water—"

With a miserable groan, I unsteadily walked along the final distance, before throwing my body down onto the soft undergrowth riverside.

"Uo……"

I unintentionally raised a sound once I laid on my stomach.

What a beautiful stream. The river wasn't wide, as I slowly crawled, I could see the stunning transparency of the water current. Like a drop of blue paint hanging on pure lack of color, I could clearly see white sands of the riverbed through the extremely clear mountain stream.

Up until several seconds ago, with the remaining small possibility that this place was the real world, I would have to consider the dangers of drinking unboiled water. However, watching the stream which looked as if it was from melted crystals, unable to resist the temptation, my right hand plunged into the river's surface. With a high-pitched sound as if it was cutting the cold water, my right hand poured the liquid into my mouth.

Could this be called sweet? I couldn't feel any impurities at all, the faint sweet and fresh taste of water made me no longer want to buy mineral water from convenience stores ever again. After using both hands to dip in the water in rapid succession, I finally put my mouth into the water surface.

While thinking that this was exactly the taste of the water of life, in the corner of my mind, the possibility that this place was a virtual world created from the current FullDive machine was completely eliminated.

That was because, for the most recent machine now —— namely, the AmuSphere, it was impossible to recreate liquid to this perfection. A polygon was an infinite number of coordinates forming a leveled surface before connecting to each other to create an object, it wasn't suitable to reproduce the randomness and complicated shape of water. However, the state of water swaying in my hands, spilling, and flowing down had no trace of artificiality in it at all.

I also want to drop the possibility that this is the real world—— while thinking so, I raised my body and looked around again. Such a clean river, the fantastic forest that continues along the opposite bank, and those vividly colored small animals, I don't think exist anywhere on earth. In general, isn't nature the thing that if touched by human hands will become a harsh environment? Also, is there any reason that I have yet to be bitten by an insect, even though I wandered around for a while dressed lightly like this?

——As I thought this, I had a feeling that the STL would summon a large horde of poisonous insects, I stood up while shaking that thought off. After I readjusted the possibility of this place being the real world down to one percent, Now, I looked to my left and right.

The flow of the river drew a gradual curve from the north to the south. The end of both directions were swallowed by groups of big trees. However, from its cleanliness, coolness, and width, I thought the source of the river should be quite close. If that was the case, the possibility of houses or towns existing downstream should be high.

It'd be easy if I had a boat… I thought as I started to walk downstream —— at that time,

The breeze that changed direction slightly carried an odd sound into my ears.

Something hard, either a big tree or something similar was struck, that kind of sound. It wasn't just once. I listened to the regular paced sound that had about a four second interval.

It isn't from an animal nor a natural source. It's almost certainly a man-made sound. It should be the sound of someone cutting a tree in this forest. But trying to approach might be dangerous, I made a bitter smile after thinking for a moment. This isn't an MMORPG world where fighting and killing is recommended anyway. Getting into contact with other people and obtaining information is currently the option at top priority.

I made a half circle turn toward the upstream of the river, where the dry echoes came from.

Suddenly, I had a feeling that I saw a strange scene.

On the right was a rippling surface of a river. A dense and deep forest on the left. In front was a green path extending to somewhere.

There, three children were walking side by side. Between a black haired boy and a light brown haired boy, a girl wearing a straw hat had her long golden hair swaying dazzlingly. Under the full mid summer sunlight, the gold radiance scattered freely.

Is this —— memory……?

Far away, the days which wouldn't return. The eternal trust they vowed to do everything to protect, but like ice dropped into sunlight, abruptly vanishing——

Those nostalgic days.

Sword Art Online
The 4th Episode
Project "Alicization"
ソードアート・オンライン
第四部
［アリシゼーション］

Part 2

Just as I blinked once, the illusory scene abruptly disappeared, just like when it had appeared.

What was that just now? Even though the illusion had already disappeared, the overflowing feeling of nostalgia wouldn't leave, the middle of my chest felt tight and painful.

A childhood memory—— I had a strong feeling when I saw the back of the three children walking along the river bank. The black haired boy walking on the right, wasn't that me?

But such a thing can't be possible. As there are no deep forests nor that clear river in Kawagoe, where I live, and I never had friends with those hair colors either. And before that, all three children were wearing the same fantasy clothes I'm wearing too.

If this is inside the STL, the illusion just now is the memory from the continuous Diving on the first weekend? But even thinking of it that way, due to the STL's Fluctlight Acceleration function, I should have been inside for ten days at most. Such a short time wouldn't be able to cause that throbbing pain in the chest from nostalgia like just now.

The situation seemed to proceed further and further into an inexplicable direction. Am I really who I thought I am? as such doubt returned to me, I fearfully looked into the surface of the river beside me, however, I couldn't see the difference as the face reflected off the undulated stream was distorted.

As I tried to forget the prickly pain of the remaining memory for now, the continuous sound that reached my ears became clear. When I tried to listen to it again, this sound also made me feel nostalgic, but I didn't know if I had heard this sound of wood being cut before. I shook my head slightly before starting to walk upstream again.

While I was moving both feet single-mindedly, I had a chance to enjoy the beautiful scenery once more, then I noticed that my direction had veered off to the left. Apparently, the source of the sound wasn't from the river bank, but seemed to be a place slightly deeper inside the forest on my left.

The strange sound I tried to count on my fingers didn't continue to echo constantly. It repeated for exactly fifty times, then was followed by a gap of

about three minutes, before resuming another fifty times. Finally I was certain that it could be nothing but a human-made sound.

During the three minutes of silence, I walked in the general direction of the sound, then made some minor adjustments when the sound resumed. I had already separated from the river bank and returned to within the forest. I proceeded silently as I reunited with the strange dragonflies, the blue lizards and the giant mushrooms.

"……Forty-nine, ……fifty…"

An unaware low voice counted at the exact same time as the fiftieth strike had ended, it was then I noticed that the gap in the grove of the trees up ahead became brighter. So that's the forest exit? Or it could possibly be a village. I quickened my feet toward the light.

I clambered over the tree roots which were raised up like stairs and when my face came out of the shadow of the old tree trunk, in front of my eyes was —— a scene that could be said to be unbelievable.

Although the forest ended right there, there was no village. However I didn't have time to feel disappointed, as I absentmindedly stared with my mouth open.

It was a circular open glade in the forest. It was certainly wider than the place I woke up a while ago. The diameter should be about thirty meters. Also, the ground which was covered in green and golden moss was different from the forest I had walked past, there were no ferns, vines, nor short shrubs at all.

Then, at the center of the clearing, my gaze was fixed on something that rose up high.

What a huge tree!

Estimating with my eyes, its diameter shouldn't be less than four meters. The trees I saw until now in this forest were all broadleaf trees with rugged and gnarled trunks, but the huge tree stretched high up in front of my eyes was a needle-leaved tree. Its bark was of a dark color close to black, and upon looking up, I could see that its branches spread out over each other high up into the sky. While I thought the Jomon cedar in Yakushima and the sequoia cedar in America I saw from images and videos were huge, I didn't think the overwhelming presence of this tree could be something in the realm of nature, and I felt that it emanated the presence of an emperor.

My gaze went from the top part, which completely obstructed the view above it, back to its base. I noticed the roots that were like big snakes wriggling about spread like a mesh in all direction, barely reaching the forest boundary where I stood. Or rather, as this tree had absorbed all the fertility, no other plant but moss could grow, resulting in the large clearing in the middle of the forest.

Thinking about intruding into the garden of the emperor made me waver slightly, but the temptation to touch the trunk of the great tree led my feet forward. Although I tripped several times due to the meandering roots below the moss, it didn't stop me from looking up above my head, I slowly proceeded.

I, who was approaching the trunk of the great tree while sighing many times in admiration, had completely forgotten to be cautious about the surroundings. As a result, it was already too late by the time I realized it.

"————!?"

My line of sight, which suddenly returned to looking straight ahead, met the face of someone whose pupils were watching me from behind the tree trunk. I swallowed my breath. Being startled, I retreated half a step before falling to the ground. My right hand was about to take something from my back, but of course, there was no sword.

Fortunately, it seemed the first person I met in this world didn't show hostility nor caution, just tilting his head in wonder.

His age should be the same as mine —— I looked at the boy, aged around seventeen, or eighteen. His soft-looking ash brown hair was slightly wavy. His clothes were the same unbleached short sleeved tunic and trousers as mine. He used the roots of the tree as a bench to sit on, and in his right hand was something round.

What was strange was his appearances. Although his skin was cream colored, he couldn't be considered a westerner and at the same time, he couldn't be an easterner either. I looked at the dark green eyes on his thin and tender features.

The moment I saw his face, my head…… the insides of my soul felt a throbbing pain. However, that feeling vanished as soon as I tried to catch it. I patiently tried to forget it, as for now, I opened my mouth to declare that I had no hostility against him. ——But, what should I say? And before that,

what language should I use? I had no idea at all. As I opened and closed my mouth repeatedly like an idiot, the boy spoke first,

"Who are you? Where did you come from?"

That slightly foreign intonation was —— in perfect Japanese.

I received the same shock as when I first looked at the jet black great tree, and became absentminded for a while. In this place, which no matter how I looked, wasn't Japan, hearing my native language in this different world was something I didn't expect at all. Once I got used to hearing the words flowing out of the mouth of this boy, who was wearing exotic clothes akin to western Europe during the Middle Ages, it felt like non-reality, as if I had jumped into a dubbed western film.

However, this was not a situation I could become engrossed in. This was where I practiced thinking. I began to desperately rotate my brain, which I felt had become rusty these days.

Assuming this world is a virtual world created by STL, in other words, «Underworld». The boy in front of me is either, ① a test player during the Dive, and possesses the real world memories just like me, ② a test player but his memories were restricted, becoming a resident of this world, or ③ an NPC being operated by the program.

If it's the first then it'd be quick. Just explain my strange situation to him and ask him for a way to log out.

But if it's the second or third, the situation won't be that easy. Toward the human that acts as an inhabitant of Underworld or an NPC, if I suddenly said something he couldn't understand like Soul Translator's abnormality or a way to log out, it might cause an intense cautiousness which will make gathering information later on become difficult.

So, it's necessary to choose some safe words to talk to this boy and assert his position. As I secretly wiped the cold sweat off my palm using my trousers, I put on a smiling face and opened my mouth,

"Umm…… my name is……"

I hesitated for a moment. Japanese style or western style, what is the common way used in this world? I then gave my name while praying that it would be suitable for both ways,

"——Kirito. I came from over there, but at the moment I'm a bit lost……"

As I spoke, I pointed at a direction behind me, probably to the south, and the boy looked at me in surprise. After placing the round object in his right hand down, he stood up with an agile movement, then pointed in the same direction as me.

"There…… the southern forest? Are you from Zakkaria?"

"N-No… it's not like that."

My face became stiff at the sudden dilemma, but I managed to answer,

"That, erm…… I also don't know where I came from…… I found myself collapsed in the middle of the forest when I woke up……"

'Oh, is something wrong with STL? Just wait for a sec, I'll connect to the operator.' ——was a reply I had expected from the bottom of my heart, however, the boy still looked surprised, he asked while still gazing at my face,

"Hmm…… don't know where you come from…… what about the town you were living in up until now……?"

"A-Ah…… I can't remember. The only thing I know is my name……"

"……That's a surprise…… The «Vector's Prank», huh. Even though I've heard about it before…… but this is the first time I have actually seen it."

"V-Vector… prank……?"

"Eh, you've never heard about it from your hometown? It's what my village calls a person who one day suddenly disappears, then later on, suddenly appears in the forest or the field. The god of darkness Vector loves to play pranks on humans by kidnapping them, pulling out their memories before throwing them out in a faraway land. Longgg ago, an old woman in my village disappeared."

"H-Heh…… Then it's possible that I'm also like that……"

My situation is getting more suspicious, I nodded as I thought so. The boy in front of me no longer seemed to be a test player who was role playing. As my emotion was driven up the wall, I started saying something a little more dangerous,

"Also…… there's some trouble, and I want to get out of here once. But… I don't know how to do so……"

I desperately prayed that this would make him understand the situation, the sympathy showed in the boy's green eyes as he nodded while saying,

"Yeah, not knowing the way, it's natural to get lost in this deep forest. But it's alright, if you go north from here, you will find a road."

"N-No… erm……"

Well, just do it then, I said out the main keyword,

"……I want to log out."

To the word I bet my ray of hope on, the boy tilted his head before asking,

"Log…… what was it? What do you mean?"

It seems it's confirmed by this.

He is either a test player that is a pure inhabitant without any idea about this being the «Virtual world», or an NPC. While I was careful not to let my disappointment show on my face, I somehow added on a few words to deceive him,

"S-Sorry, it seems I used the wrong wording for this region. Hmm…… I mean is there a village or a town somewhere I could stay in."

It was painful for me to say it. The boy then nodded in appreciation.

"Heh…… It's the first time I heard such a word. Your black hair is also unusual around here…… it could be possible that you were born in the south."

"Y-Yeah, that may be so."

I gave a stiff smile as I looked at the boy who was smiling without any ill will, then, he frowned in pity.

"Hmmm, a place to stay. Although my village is just to the north, as there are no travellers around here, there is no inn. But…… if you explained your circumstances, perhaps Sister Azariya would help you and let you stay in the church."

"I-Is that so, that's great."

Those were my true feelings. If there was a village, it could be possible that there might be staff from RATH Diving in, or they might be monitoring the village from the outside.

"Then I'll go to the village. Is it directly north from here?"

My gaze moved towards the almost opposite direction to where I had came from and there I saw a narrow path stretched out before me. However, before my feet could start moving, the boy made a gesture using his left hand to stop me.

"Ah, wait a bit. There are guards at the village, it might be difficult to explain if you suddenly went there alone. I'll go with you and help explain the circumstances."

"That would help a lot, thank you."

I smiled as I thanked him, at the same time, muttered in my mind, Apparently you're not an NPC. Your replies are too natural for the pseudo-personality program which can only act on the preset responses, and the active action toward me just now also wasn't NPC-like.

Although I don't know whether he Dives from the development office in Roppongi, or from the main office somewhere in the bay area, the owner of the Fluctlight which moved the boy in front of me has a really kind personality. As soon as I escape safely, I want to thank him properly.

As I was thinking about this, the boy made a gloomy face again.

"Ah…… but, I still can't go right now though…… As I'm still working……"

"Work?"

"Yeah. I'm on a break now."

I moved my gaze to something wrapped with cloth beside the boy's feet, two items of which one seemed to be a portion of round bread could be seen, So that's what he held at first. while the other object was just a water canteen made from leather, a pretty simple menu for a lunch.

"Ah, did I disturb your meal?"

I shrank my neck, while the boy smiled timidly.

"If you can wait until I finish work, I'll accompany you to ask Sister Azariya to let you stay at the church…… but it would be about four more hours."

I actually wanted to go to the village and search for the person who could explain this situation to me as soon as possible, but the feeling that I wanted to avoid having further conversations that were like treading on thin ice was even greater. Four hours wasn't a short time but when thinking about the consciousness acceleration function of STL, the time in reality that would elapse would be about an hour and several minutes.

Also, for a reason I didn't understand, I also felt like I wanted to talk with this kind boy a bit more. I nodded as I said,

"It's fine, I'll wait. I may cause you trouble, but I'll be in your care."

Then, a smile brighter than earlier appeared on the boy's face as he nodded in return.

"I see, then… just sit there for a while. Ah…… I still haven't told you my name."

The boy extended his right hand, as he continued,

"I'm Eugeo. Nice to meet you, Kirito-kun."

As I grabbed his strong hand, which contrasted with his slender looks, I repeated the boy's name several times in my mouth. It wasn't in my memories, I didn't know what language it came from, but somehow I felt the name was familiar with my tongue for some reason.

The boy who called himself Eugeo pulled his hand back and returned to sit at the base of the great tree, before taking out the round bread from the cloth wrapping and offering it me.

"N-No, I can't…"

I hurriedly waved my hands, but the boy showed no sign of withdrawal.

"Kirito-kun must be hungry, right? You haven't eaten anything yet, have you?"

Just as he said that, I unintentionally held my hand over my abdomen to suppress the overwhelming hunger. Even though the water from river tasted good, I couldn't say it could fill me up.

"No… but……"

I was still refraining myself, but the hand pressed the bread forward even more, I then accepted it unavoidably. The boy —— Eugeo grinned and shrugged.

"It's okay. Even though I said it like I want you to eat, in truth, I don't like this anyway."

"……Then I'll gratefully accept. To be honest, I'm really hungry to the point where I could collapse at anytime."

'That's what I thought,' As Eugeo laughed and sat down on the root in front of the tree, I added,

"Also, just Kirito is fine."

"Oh? Then you can just call me Eugeo too…… Ah, just wait a bit."

Eugeo lifted his left hand to stop me from putting the round bread into my mouth.

"……?"

"Well, since it's not the 'Pan' that can last long, just to be sure."

As he said that, Eugeo's left hand moved while his right hand held the bread up. His index and middle fingers stretched and aligned neatly with the other folded fingers. With his hand in that shape, he drew a trace which looked like the alphabets S and C in mid-air.

In front of me, who was watching dumbfounded, his two fingers tapped lightly on the bread which made a strange metal striking sound and a pale purple translucent rectangle appeared. Its width was about fifteen centimeters, while the height was about eight centimeters. According to my knowledge, this familiar looking rectangle, along with the alphabets and Arabic numerals being displayed on it using a simple font I could understand right away. This was —— without a doubt, the so-called «Status Window».

With my mouth left opened, I thought to myself,

——Then it's concluded. This place isn't reality nor the real other world, but the virtual world.

My body felt lightened with relief as soon as that acknowledgement had settled down at the bottom of my abdomen. Now I'm ninety-nine percent convinced. Really, without this clear evidence, the anxiety would eat up my whole body.

While the circumstances about the Dive still remained unknown, in the meantime, I had better get used to this virtual world and enjoy the situation. First off, I should try opening that window, I stretched two fingers of my left hand straight.

I imitated what I saw by tracing the S and C shape, fearfully tapping my bread, resulting in a sound resembling that of a bell's, and a purple window floated up. I brought my face close and gazed at it.

The displayed string of characters were unusually simple. It was just [Durability: 7]. I could easily understand that it was the endurance value of this bread. As I thought what would happen when the value reached zero while gazing at the figure; in front of me, Eugeo doubtfully asked,

"Hey, Kirito. Don't tell me this is the first time you have see the sacred arts of «Stacia Window»?"

When I lifted my face, I saw Eugeo with his head tilted as he held the bread in one hand, his window had already disappeared. I quickly made a face that looked like 'Don't say something nonsensical like that.' When I touched the surface of the window, it turned into sparks of light and scattered away, I felt slightly relieved.

Fortunately, Eugeo didn't show any more doubt and nodded.

"There's still quite a lot of «Life» left, so there's no need to hurry eating it. But if this was summer, it wouldn't have this much remaining though."

Perhaps the «Life» he mentioned is the number displayed next to the item's durability, and the status window displaying those is called «Stacia Window». Seeing the action command that called the window out being declared as sacred arts, Eugeo wouldn't know that was the function of the system, but acknowledged them as a religious or magical phenomenon.

There're still many things to think about, but better shelve them for now and deal with my near-term hunger first.

"Then, itadakimasu."

I brought the bread into my opened mouth as soon as I finished saying that, but the hardness of the bread caused my eyes to darken. However, I couldn't spit it out either, so I forcefully bit and tore it off. I was unintentionally impressed by the sense of wobbling teeth in this realistic virtual world.

It was similar or perhaps even harder than the whole grain bread bought by my younger sister, Suguha. The hungry me operated my jaw to chew the thing which was crunchier than necessary, although its taste was passable. With some butter, or a slice of cheese…… no, just grilling it a little bit should be much better, as I thought various ungrateful things, Eugeo, who also frowned while biting the bread, said as he gave a bitter smile.

"It's not very good, right?"

I hurriedly shook my head.

"N-No, it's not like that."

"It's fine, no need to force yourself. I usually buy them from the Pan shop in the village before leaving, but as I leave in the early morning they only

have the Pan left over from yesterday for sale. At noon, I don't have enough time to go back to the village either……"

"Heh…… Then it should be better to bring a boxed-lunch from home……"

To my casual words, Eugeo lowered his eyes with the bread in his hand. I shrank my neck unsure if I blurted something rude, fortunately, he soon lifted up his face and gave a little smile.

"A very longgg time ago…… at noon, there was a person who would bring a boxed-lunch here. But now……"

The green pupils shook, they were filled with a great sense of loss, in that moment, I forgot that this was the artificial world as I leaned my body forward.

"That person… what happened……?"

After I asked, Eugeo looked toward the treetop far above his head in silence for a while, then he slowly moved his lips,

"……My childhood friend. The girl, who was the same age as me…… we were always playing together from morning until evening since we were young. Even after I was given the Sacred Task, she would still bring a boxed-lunch here everyday…… But… six years ago…… during my eleventh summer an Integrity Knight came to our village…… and took her to the capital……"

Integrity Knight. Capital.

Those words of unknown nature were the kind that bore the mark of those who maintained the regularity and the capital of this world, I stayed silent to encourage him to continue.

"It was…… my fault. On one rest day, we both went to explore the northern cave…… but we got lost on the way back and ended up on the other side of the Mountain range at the Edge. You know, right? The Dark Territory where it is written in the Taboo Index not to set our foot on. Although I didn't exit the cave, she tripped and her palm pressed on the ground outside…… But just because of that… the Integrity Knight came to the village and tied her up in chains in front of everyone……"

Eugeo crushed the half-eaten bread in his right hand.

"……I wanted to help her. I thought it was fine if he took me along with her, and planned to use the axe to attack him…… but… hands too… feet too… I couldn't move them. All I did was just… watch her being taken away… without saying anything……"

His face was void of any expression as he gazed up into the sky for a while but soon after, a faint self-deprecating smile floated to his lips. He then tossed the crushed bread into his mouth and chewed it while looking downward.

I didn't know what I should say, so I also took a bite of the bread, and thought as I chewed with all my strength.

The existence of the status window proved that this is a virtual world created by the realistic technology, it could be some experiment by someone. However, why did such an «Event» like this happen? After I swallowed the bread, I hesitantly asked,

"……Do you know what happened to her……?"

Eugeo shook his head slightly as he faced downward.

"The Integrity Knight said she'd be executed after the interrogation…… But, what kind of execution, I don't know. I once… heard from her father, the village chief Gasupht…… that she is already dead…… ——But Kirito, I believe that she's still alive."

The next moment,

"Alice is… definitely alive and is somewhere in the capital……"

I inhaled sharply the moment I heard that name.

Again, I felt a strange feeling running in the center of my head. A sense of irritation. A sense of loneliness. And more than those, a sense of nostalgia that shook my soul——

It's just my delusion. I persuaded myself, It's just what remained after the shock. There is no reason for me to have a personal relationship with Eugeo's childhood friend, or in other words, «Alice» who is the inhabitant of this world. Surely it was just the reaction to the common name Alice. Yes —— didn't Asuna tell me yesterday at Dicey Café? «RATH», the company which developed the STL, and the virtual world «Underworld», weren't those names taken from the novel『Alice in Wonderland』?

Her name fitting with the other two names is a surprising coincidence, there might be a meaning behind it. Also, I noticed another piece of information from Eugeo's words.

Just now he said six years ago, when he was eleven. It means that he's now seventeen, but that's just too long —— his manner of speech is like he has all the memories of those ten years of life, just like me.

But something like that can't be possible. From what I've been told, the Fluctlight acceleration function could speed up to three time, in order to simulate this world for seventeen years, it would require six years in the real world. However, it shouldn't have been three months since the roll-out of the STL experimental machine yet.

What should I think about this?

This isn't the STL I know, but inside of an unknown FullDive machine, moreover, it has been running for seventeen years. Or, maybe what I've heard about the FLA function being three times was a mistake, and it actually could accelerate more than thirty times. But either of them is equally unbelievable.

Inside my head, anxiety and curiosity were rapidly expanding. I wanted to log out right now and ask the person outside to explain the situation, on the other hand, I also wanted to stay inside and continue chasing after the questions.

After I swallowed the last piece of the bread, I fearfully asked Eugeo,

"Then…… don't you want to go looking for her? At that… capital."

I thought 'Crap,' right after I asked that. As my words pulled out an unexpected reaction from Eugeo.

The light brown haired boy looked at my face absentmindedly for several seconds then soon after, he whispered 'Unthinkable.'

"……This Rulid village is at the north edge of the northern empire. Going to the capital to the south, even if we used a fast horse it would still take a week. If we walked, it'll take two days to reach the closest town, Zakkaria. It's impossible to reach that place even if I leave the village on the dawn of a rest day."

"Then…… just make some proper preparations for a long journey……"

"Hey Kirito… You look similarly aged as me, weren't you given a Sacred Task at the village you live in? Abandoning the Sacred Task and going out on a travel isn't something we can do, is it?"

"……T-That's true."

While I was nodding, I carefully observed Eugeo's reactions.

It's obvious from the start that this boy isn't just a simple NPC. From his abundance of expressions and his natural replies, he couldn't be anything but a real human.

But at the same time, his actions seemed to be bound to absolute rules which are more effective than the law in the real world. Yes, it's similar to how the NPC in VRMMO can't deviate from within their movement boundary.

Eugeo said he wasn't arrested because he didn't trespass into the area restricted by the «Taboo Index». In other words, that Index is the absolute rules which binds him, perhaps it has direct control over Fluctlight. While I don't know what his Sacred Task…, no, what his occupation is, I couldn't imagine what job would be more important than the life and death of the girl who was always together with him since birth.

To confirm it, I carefully selected my words and asked Eugeo, who was drinking from the water canteen,

"Umm, in Eugeo's village, other than Alice-san, is there anyone else who broke the Taboo…… Index and was taken to the capital?"

Eugeo made rounded eyes again, before wiping his mouth and shaking his head.

"Nope. In the three hundred years history of Rulid, the only time the Integrity Knight ever came to the village was six years ago, this is what Garitta-jiisan said."

As he finished his words, he passed me the leather canteen. I received it and pulled off the cork-like plug after thanking him. I then brought it to my mouth and drank the liquid, which wasn't cold but had a fragrance, as if it was mixed with lemon and herb. After three gulps, I returned the canteen to Eugeo.

While I wiped my mouth with an innocent look, the insides of my chest were blown by the storm of surprise for god knew how many times.

————Three hundred years!?

Without the so-called «Setting», but instead actually simulating across that long period, then the actual acceleration of the FLA function should be several hundred times…… or might even reach a thousand times. In that case, if that rate was applied during my continuous Dive test on the first weekend, how much time could I actually feel inside? At the same time I shuddered, I felt light goosebumps on my arms, but I didn't have time to admire that realistic physiological reaction.

As I obtained more information, the mystery seemed even more complex. Is Eugeo actually a human, or a program? Also, what exactly is the purpose of creating this world——

I couldn't know more than this without going to the village Eugeo calls Rulid and making contact with other people. From there, it'd be great if I could meet people from RATH who know of the situation…… As I thought so, I somehow managed to smile before saying to Eugeo,

"Thanks for the food. But I'm sorry I took half of your lunch."

"No, don't worry. I'm quite sick of that Pan anyway."

He replied with a very natural smile as he quickly collected the lunch wrapping.

"Then, sorry but just wait for a while. Until I finish my afternoon work."

Eugeo said as he stood up with an agile movement, I then asked,

"Now you mentioned it, Eugeo's work…… the Sacred Task, what is it?"

"Ah, right…… you can't see from over there."

Eugeo smiled again while beckoning me. I tilted my head as I stood up and walked around the trunk of the great tree behind him.

Then, being struck by another surprise, my mouth was left wide open.

On the trunk of the huge tree, which was as black as a dark night, there was a cut about twenty percent or more into its diameter —— around a meter deep. The black wood inside was reminiscent of coal, the thick layers of the annual tree rings were glossy like metal.

My gaze moved down from the cut, to an axe set against the trunk. Although its simple single-edged shape wasn't used for battle, the very

large axe blade and the long handle were both made from the same greyish-white material. As I stared at its mysterious radiance, like it was a stainless steel matte finish, I somehow felt it was carved from a single lump of the raw material.

Eugeo's right hand grabbed the axe by it's handle which was bound with black shiny leather, and shouldered it. He then walked to the left edge of the one and a half meter cut, spread his legs, lowered his waist, and tightly clenched his hands on the grip.

The slim body bent, the axe, which was drawn greatly backward, took a moment to gather the momentum before it sharply tore the air. The blade, which looked heavy, cleanly hit at the center of the cut, Gaan! a clear high-pitched metallic sound reverberated. No doubt, this is the true nature of the strange sound that led me here. A wood cutting sound, my baseless intuition was correct.

In front of me, who was observing in admiration, it could be said Eugeo handled his body perfectly, he repeatedly hit while maintaining the pace and trajectory beyond the accuracy of a machine. Drawing back took two seconds, gathering force one second, swinging one second. His chain of actions were so fluent it was as if the sword skills also existed in this world.

Exactly fifty times at a pace of four seconds each time, the axe continued hitting for two hundred seconds, and after the final strike, Eugeo pulled the axe out of the deep cut and let out a long breath. He then set the tool against the trunk and sat on top of the root nearby. The beads of sweat on his forehead were shining as he caught his breath. While I was watching him, I thought swinging that axe must be more difficult than I had imagined.

I waited for his breathing to settle before asking,

"So Eugeo's work…… no, Sacred Task is «Woodcutter»? Is it cutting the trees in this forest?"

Taking a handkerchief out of the pocket of his clothes and wiping his face, Eugeo titled his head slightly and replied after thinking for a moment,

"Yeah, well… it can be said like that. But the tree concerning the Sacred Task that I have spent seven years trying to cut down is just this one."

"Ehh?"

"The name of this huge tree is «Gigas Cedar» in the sacred words. But the elderly in the village call it the evil tree."

……Sacred words? Giga……Scedar……?

Eugeo gave an understanding smile toward me, who was in doubt, as he pointed straight upward to the treetop far overhead.

"The reason they call it as such is because it absorbs all of Terraria's blessing from its surrounding ground. So nothing but moss would live under the branches of this tree, and the trees within range of its shadow wouldn't grow taller either."

Terraria, while I don't know what that is, it seems my first impression after I saw this tree and the clearing isn't wrong. I nodded to encourage him to continue.

"The adults in the village want to expand the wheat fields to this forest. But it's futile as long as this tree still stands. So they want to cut it down, but as expected from the evil tree, its trunk is terribly hard. If a normal steel axe is used, its blade would break and no longer be usable in just one hit. Because of that, they spent a large amount of money to order this axe, which was carved from an ancient dragon's bone, from the capital, and assigned «Cutting duty» to someone to keep cutting at it here daily. And that would be me."

I rotated my gaze between Eugeo, who carelessly said it, and the one quarter cut on the great tree.

"……It means, in the past seven years Eugeo spent every day trying to cut this tree, and you only got this far in that time?"

This time Eugeo made round eyes and shook his head in surprise.

"No way. If this cut required only seven years, then I'd feel a little more encouraged. Listen, I'm the seventh generation for this cutting duty. Ever since Rulid was found on this land, for three hundred years, each generation of the people with cutting duty came here everyday. Perhaps, the progress when I become a grandfather and pass over the axe to the eighth generation would be……"

Eugeo used his two hands to make a gap about twenty centimeters wide.

"About this much, I guess."

I couldn't even let my breath out anymore.

In a fantasy type MMO, even though the craftsman and miner production jobs were generally recognized as jobs which required enduring working single-mindedly, spending a whole life and still unable to cut down a single tree was just far beyond normal. As this was the artificial world, it must be someone's intention to place this tree here, although for what purpose, I still had no idea at the moment.

——But, anyway, I had an itching feeling like something was crawling down my back.

Partly due to impulse, I said to Eugeo, who stood up and grabbed the axe after he had rested for three minutes.

"Hey, Eugeo…… could you let me try for a bit?"

"Eh?"

"Um, I took half of your lunch. So I should use my muscle to help with half of your work too, right?"

I felt as if it was my first time offering to help someone to do his work —— and it was probably so —— Eugeo had his mouth slightly opened, but soon after he hesitantly replied,

"Hmm…… well, although there's no rules forbidding someone to help with the Sacred Task…… well, this is unexpectedly difficult. At first I couldn't even strike at the right place."

"We won't know until we try, right?"

As I grinned, I stretched out my right hand and grabbed the handle of the «Dragon Bone Axe» which Eugeo held out while he still had a doubtful expression.

The axe was heavy, despite its looks that it was made out of bone, and weighed down my right hand. I quickly grabbed the leather grip with both hands and made a small swing to confirm the balance.

Even though I had never used an axe as my main weapon in SAO and ALO, I should be able to hit a stationary target without any problem. I stood on the left of the deep cut, then mimicked Eugeo's pose by spreading my legs and slightly lowered my waist.

Eugeo still had a doubtful expression, but at the same time he also looked amused. After I had affirmed that he was far enough away, I lifted the axe high over my shoulders, then I clenched my teeth and put as much force as possible into my arms, before swinging the axe down, aiming at the center of the deep cut on the trunk of Giga Scedar.

Gagi, with a dull sound, the axe blade hit at a place about five centimeters away from the cut. Orange sparks scattered while a violent feedback assaulted my hands. I couldn't bear it and dropped the axe, before putting both wrists, which were numb to the bone, between my feet and groaning,

"O-Ouch-ouch-ouch."

Unsightly, looking at me who couldn't even do a single strike, 'Ahahaha……' Eugeo laughed amusedly. When I turned my reproachful glance toward him, 'Sorry,' he indicated with his right hand, but still continued to laugh.

"……You don't have to laugh that much……"

"Hahaha…… no, sorry sorry. Kirito, you didn't use force from your shoulders and waist. You need to use force from your entire body…… hmm, how should I explain it……"

While watching Eugeo repeat a slow swinging movement of the axe, I belatedly realized my mistake. Perhaps the strict law of physics and the contraction of the muscle were not simulated in this world. As this was a realistic dream created by STL, the most important thing had to be the power of my imagination.

Finally as the numbness left my hands, I picked up the axe off my feet.

"Just watch, this time I will surely hit……"

As I grumbled, this time I tried as hard as possible not to be concerned about the force. I kept focusing on the movement of my entire body in my consciousness while I made a big and slow drawing movement. Before entering the motion of the horizontal slashing attack type sword skill, «Horizontal» which I used frequently in SAO, I drew power from twisting my waist which was added into the rotating momentum of my shoulders and passed through my wrists towards the blade of the axe… and striking into the tree——

This time I hit the tree bark far away from the cut, Gain, the axe bounced off after it made an unpleasant sound. However, my hands didn't go numb like the first time, it seemed I had completely neglected the aim because I focused only on the movement of my body. This time too, Eugeo sure has more things to laugh at, I turned my head while thinking this, but Eugeo made an unexpectedly serious face as he gave a comment,

"Oo…… Kirito, just now wasn't bad. But, you didn't watch the axe as you swung. Your gaze must not move off the center of the cut. Try again before you forget it!"

"O-Okay."

The next one was also crude. But after that, Eugeo still gave advice here and there as I continued swinging the axe, I forgot how many times it was before the axe finally managed to make a high-pitched metallic sound as it struck at the center of the cut, sending off some small black fragments.

After that I took turns with Eugeo and had a chance to watch fifty of his excellent axe swings. Then I took the axe and made another fifty swings.

We repeated this for some time, and by the time I realized it, the sun had already reached the horizon, and the clearing was bathed in a hazy, orange tinted light. As I drank the last gulp from the big water canteen, Eugeo also finished his last strike, and then said,

"Alright…… this makes two thousand."

"Eh, we did that many?"

"Yeah. Five hundred from me, and five hundred from Kirito. Together with the morning part, striking the Gigas Cedar two thousand times each day, that's my Sacred Task."

"Two thousand times……"

I looked at the big cut on the jet black great tree again. No matter how I looked, it wasn't any deeper than when we had first started. What an unrewarding job, while I was astonished, the cheerful voice of Eugeo came from behind.

"Actually, Kirito has good muscle. Of the last fifty times, you made a good sound two… three times. Thanks to you, today I had a lot of fun."

"No…… but it should have finished a lot faster if Eugeo did it alone. Sorry, I was supposed to help but instead I was holding you back……"

I apologized in embarrassment, but Eugeo just smiled as he shook his head.

"Didn't I tell you I couldn't cut this tree down within my life span? Because half of the cut we did today would recover during the night…… Oh ya, I'll show you something good. I'm not supposed to open it too often, though."

While he said that, Eugeo approached the great tree and stretched his left hand. After he used two fingers to slice the symbol, he struck the black bark of the tree.

I see, this tree is also set up with durability, I rushed over to Eugeo as I thought that. Along with a bell-like sound, the status window floated out, no the «Stacia Window», I peeked at it along with Eugeo.

"Ue……"

I inadvertently groaned. The figure displayed on the window was some two hundred and thirty-two thousands, an absurd amount like that.

"Hmmm, it's about fifty less than when I looked last month, huh……"

Indeed, Eugeo also said in a tired tone.

"Kirito, this means…… even if I spent a whole year striking it, the Life of Gigas Cedar would decrease by about six hundred. By the time I retire, over two hundred thousand would still remain. Now you understand…… just half a day of slightly less progress isn't a big deal at all. My opponent isn't just a tree, but the «Titanic great cedar» after all."

When I heard those words, I realized the origin of the title of the Giga Scedar. It was a combination of Latin and English. The word didn't cut at Giga, but Gigas Cedar…… the giant cedar.

In other words, to the boy who is standing before me, aside of the Japanese language he uses fluently, English and other languages are some kind of spell incantations, the «Sacred Words». Then perhaps he doesn't realize that he is speaking in Japanese. The Underworld language…… no, the Norlangarth empire's language? But wait a sec, just now he called the bread «Pan». Pan is probably not an English word…… is it Portuguese? Or Spanish?

As I was having a spree of derailed thoughts, before I noticed, Eugeo had already finished packing up and said,

"Kirito, sorry for the wait. Let's go back to the village."

After that, while shouldering the Dragon Bone Axe, and carrying the empty water canteen, as we walked back to the village Eugeo cheerfully talked about various things. About his predecessor, the elder named Garitta who was adept at using axe; about how he was slightly unhappy that the children of the same age in the village thought that Eugeo's Sacred Task was easy; while I kept responding to his stories, my mind still focused on the same thought.

It was the question about what was the purpose of this world, how it was being operated.

If it is to verify the STL's «Mnemonic Visual» technology, then it had already achieved perfection. As I already sense its indistinguishable from the reality all too well by now.

Regarding the internal time of this world, at least three hundred years had been simulated, the terrifying thing is that great tree —— considering the amount of Eugeo's work could do against the durability of Gigas Cedar, I think it would continue for close to a thousand years.

While I don't know what the upper limit the Fluctlight acceleration function can reach, in the worst case, the person who Dives into this world with sealed memories could spend the entire life inside. Certainly it wouldn't cause any danger to the muscles in the real world, and as the memories were blocked until the time the Dive ended, the person would probably feel like it was just a vague «Long dream» —— however, what would happen to the soul, the Fluctlight which experienced that dream? The aggregation of light quanta which made up human consciousness, wouldn't it also have a lifespan?

No matter how I think, what had been done to this world is just too overexerted, unreasonable, and inconsiderate.

By braving such danger, there must be a purpose —— but what is it? At Dicey café, Sinon said, to create just a realistic virtual space, the AmuSphere would already be feasible. There must be «Something» that could only be achieved by spending infinite time in the virtual world which matches the level of the real world——

I suddenly lifted my face, I could see the orange light spreading over the gap in the forest ahead of the narrow path. At the gap of the roadside near the exit, there was a building which seemed to be a storage hut standing there. Eugeo walked toward it and casually opened the door. As I took a peek from behind, there were a few ordinary iron axes, a small bladed tool which looked like a machete, and group of tools such as rope and a bucket, among them, there was an elongated leather package which I didn't know the contents of.

Eugeo placed the «Dragon Bone Axe» between them, and closed the door shut. When he then turned around and came back to the path, I quickly asked,

"Eh, is it alright not to lock the door? It's a very important axe, isn't it?

Eugeo rounded his eyes in surprise.

"Lock? Why?"

"Why… wouldn't it be stolen……"

I said until I finally realised. A thief didn't exist. Because, it must be written in the «Taboo Index» he mentioned earlier to forbid the act of stealing. To me who had interrupted my own sentence, Eugeo made a serious look and gave an answer I was expecting,

"There is no way such a thing would happen. Because I'm the only one who opens this hut."

'That's right,' as I nodded in response, a question welled up in my mind.

"Err, but…… didn't Eugeo say there are guards at the village? If there are no thieves then why is such a job needed?"

"Isn't it obvious? To protect the village from the forces of darkness."

"The forces of…… darkness……"

"Look over there, you see it, right?"

We just walked past under the last tree as Eugeo lifted up his right hand.

In front of my eyes were the wheat fields. They were still young, the green heads which had yet to swell were swaying in the wind. The scene which was greatly pleasing, in the dusk sunlight looked just like the sea. The path stretched into the meandering expanse of the fields, where I saw a small

elevated hill far up ahead. When I focused on the hill which was surrounded by a grove of trees, I saw sand textured buildings gathered together and there was a noticeably tall tower at the center. Apparently, this seems to be where Eugeo lives, the Rulid village.

But where Eugeo pointed at was beyond the village —— at the faint pure white line of a mountain range in the far off distance. The steep mountain ridge which looked like a saw stretched to the left and right edges of my vision.

"That is the «Mountain range at the Edge». On its other side is the place where the light of Solus can't reach, the land of darkness. Even at noon, the sky would be covered by dark clouds, the light from the heaven is red like blood. The ground, the trees, are all black like charcoal……"

Eugeo should have recalled a certain event in the distant past, as his voice became weak and trembled.

"……Living in the land of darkness are the cursed demi-humans like goblins and orcs, along with other terrifying monsters…… also, the dark knights who ride the black dragons. Of course the Integrity Knights who are protecting the mountain range have prevented them from invading, but sometimes, some seem to be able to slip through the underground caves. But I haven't seen any yet though. Also, according to the legend from the Axiom Church…… once every one thousand years, when the light of Solus weakens, the forces of darkness led by the dark knights would cross the mountain range and start their attacks against us. In that great war, the guards in the village, the sentinels from all towns and the imperial army would be led by the Integrity Knights to fight against the hordes of monsters."

As he tilted his head in doubt, Eugeo asked,

"……It's the tale which even the smallest child in the village knows. Has Kirito also forgotten about this tale?"

"Y……Yeah, I felt like I heard about it before though…… just… a bit different in details, I guess."

I fearfully tried to dodge his question, Eugeo expression changed into a smile like he had no doubt, before nodding.

"I see…… Perhaps, it could be possible that Kirito didn't come from Norlangarth but one of the three other empires."

"T-That may be so."

While I was nodding, I tried to drive him off this dangerous topic and pointed to the hill which we were now considerably closer to.

"That is Rulid village, right? Where is Eugeo's house?"

"What we see is the south gate, my house is near the west gate, so we can't see it from here."

"Hmm. The highest tower is… Sister…… Azariya's church?"

"Yeah, that's right."

I focused my gaze at the top of the tower, there was a symbol which was a combination of a cross and a circle.

"It's somehow… even more elegant than I had thought. Someone like me can really stay there?"

"Don't worry. Sister Azariya is really great person."

It might not be easy, but if Azariya-san had the same belief in the intrinsic goodness of other people like Eugeo, then the problem wouldn't occur if I gave sensible responses. But, right now I'm the guy who lacks sensible ideas about this world.

Ideally, if Sister Azariya is the RATH's resident observer, then the story would be easy. But perhaps, the staff whose purpose is to observe shouldn't be assigned important roles like the village chief or the sister. The possibility that he would be one of the very plain villager is higher, I have to find out by any means possible.

But that's only if they actually placed an observer in this small village…… as I worried, Eugeo and I crossed the moss covered stone bridge which spanned over the narrow waterway, and set foot into «Rulid village».

Part 3

"Here's a pillow and a blanket. If the weather is too cold, please move further into the house. Morning Prayer is at 6am, and breakfast starts at 7. You should come along to look, so try to wake up early. Also, going out after the lights are turned off is forbidden. Please take note of that."

A simple pillow and wool blanket came flying at me with the words that sounded like a torrent, and I hurriedly reached out to receive them.

I sat down on the bed, and the person standing in front of me was a girl that looked twelve. She's dressed in a black habit with a white collar, and the bright tea-colored hair grew down to the waist. The eyes that were of the same color as the hair were moving in a lively manner, but she seemed to change into a completely different person the moment she started to be in her Sister persona.

The girl called Selka was an apprentice Sister staying at the Church to learn the sacred arts. I didn't know whether she was also tasked to look after the other young boys and girls who also stayed in the church as her tone to me was as sharp as an older sister or a mother. I could only smile and endure this.

"Then, is there anything else you don't understand?"

"No, no problems. Thank you very much."

On hearing me thank her, Selka's expression eased slightly, only to quickly frown again.

"Then, good night—you know how to turn the lamp off, right?"

"...Ahh. Good night, Selka."

Selka nodded again and moved out of the room in her slightly oversized habit. I waited for the sound of her footsteps to go further away before heaving a long sigh.

The place I'm staying at was a room on the second level of the church that was hardly used. It's about 6 tatamis wide, and the room itself had a bed made of cast iron, a table set with a chair, a small bookshelf and a cupboard. I put the wool blanket and the pillow on my knees onto the bedsheet, put both hands behind my head and laid on the bed. The lamp above my head let out a creaking sound as it swayed.

"What exactly is going on here..."

What's going on? I muttered these words in my heart and recalled everything that happened ever since I was sent into this village.

Eugeo brought me to this village, and we first went to the Guard Sentry Point near the gate. There was a young man who was of a similar age as Eugeo over there called Jink, and he gave me suspicious look at first, but after hearing that I was a «Vector's lost child», he immediately agreed to let me in.

But as Eugeo was explaining, my eyes were fixed on that simple long sword on Jink's waist, and didn't actually hear about what they were talking about. I really wanted to borrow that slightly old long sword from him and try out whether the me in this world — or more accurately, the virtual swordsman Kirito's sword skills could still be used. It couldn't be helped that I had such an impulse, but I finally managed to control the urge.

Eugeo and I then left the Sentry Point, and I endured the cautious and bewildered stares of the villagers as I walked down the main street. I kept hearing questions like 'who is he', as Eugeo stopped to explain to everyone. We spent about 30 minutes walking before reaching the central plaza of this village. On the way, we even met an old lady carrying a large basket, and she immediately started saying things like 'such a poor kid' the moment she saw us and took an apple (or what looked like it) and stuffed it into my hand, making me feel a slight sense of guilt.

The sun had almost set below the horizon by the time we reached the church that was built on the hill and formed a part of the village. We knocked on the door, and a Sister appeared, looking like sternness-personified. This is the Sister Azariya I heard of. I looked at her, and immediately thought of the Minchin-sensei that appeared in the «Little Princess». THIS CAN'T DO! I yelled inside my heart. However, the Sister immediately took me in, which was really not what I expected, and even served me a meal.

After agreeing to meet tomorrow, I bade farewell to Eugeo and went in. After getting to know Selka, the oldest, and the other 6 kids that were younger than her, we sat down at the harmonious dining table (the dishes laid out were potatoes that looked like fried fish. After having my meal, I was interrogated by them, and this was all to be expected. Once I answered all their questions and thoughts that didn't reveal myself, 3 boys invited me to go bathe with them...just like that, I endured all sorts of trials,

and right now, I finally gained release as I laid on the bed in the guest room— that's what had happened up till now.

'The accumulated exhaustion of the entire day had already invaded my body and if I closed my eyes, I could sleep quickly. However, the confusion that attacked me prevented this.

"What's going on?" I muttered silently to myself.

In conclusion, everyone in this village aside from me was an NPC.

From the first moment I met Jink, to the time when I walked past the villagers in the village, at those moments when I met the old granny who gave me an apple, the stern yet delicate Sister Azariya, the apprentice Sister Selka, the 6 orphaned children; all of them were like Eugeo, having real emotions like me, able to talk normally and able to do the delicate movements of the body. Basically, everyone was human-like. At least, they're not like the characters that would automatically answer in a VRMMO.

—But, this kind of thing isn't something that can be done.

Right now, there's only one Soul Translator at the headquarters in Roppongi, and the company itself was going to roll out 3 machines, which would make it 4. That's what the developer Higa said. Even if we added in one or two units, it should be impossible to create a Dive system for enough people to form a village. Even as I was walking and observing, there were at least 300 villagers in Rulid, and that large STL experimental machine couldn't possibly be mass produced. Also, if we added in the few villages and cities in this world and the people of the fabled «Capital», even if they invested a lot of money to add new machines, it should be impossible to secretly gather thousands of test players.

"...Speaking of which."

Eugeo and the rest aren't real humans — they're players with restricted memories, I guess? Or are they automatic answering programs that far exceed what I know...?

On thinking about this, my mind immediately thought of the term «Artificial Intelligence».

In recent years, AIs, the electronic assistance for password codes, car navigation, and home electric appliance use, have been greatly developed.

Once they hear a command given, a character, that's like a human or an animal, can correctly operate or obtain the necessary information. Besides these, there are other AIs, like the NPCs I'm familiar with in VR games. Though their main functions are to provide quests or event information, they can still answer casual dialogue to a certain extent. A group of people who believed in having «Moe NPCs» will always camp beside the beauty-types and talk with them.

Of course, these AIs don't really have intelligence. Basically put, they're just a collection of commands that only know how to answer certain questions. Thus, if they end up seeing a question that's not in the database, the NPC will most likely smile nicely or tilt their heads to say something like 'I don't understand what you mean'.

However, Eugeo never showed anything like this today.

He showed all sorts of natural emotions like 'shock', 'doubt' and 'laughter' with regards to all my questions and made appropriate responses. It wasn't just Eugeo who was like this, as the Sister Azariya, Selka and those young kids were all like that. There was no instance where they showed an expression of 'being unable to find the data'.

As far as I know, amongst the current Artificial Intelligence, the highest standard is the AI called Yui, the counseling program who was developed for maintenance in the old SAO, and has now become Asuna's and my 'daughter'. During those two years, she continued to talk to countless players and monitor them, and had managed to build up a large and amazing database for response. Right now, she's at a level where she can be considered 'an automatic answering program' and a 'real intelligence'.

However, even Yui isn't perfect. Sometimes, she would tilt her head as the database didn't have the information, and would sometimes mistake a human's 'apparent anger' with 'awkwardness of trying to hide embarrassment'. For just that moment, she would show that small 'AI-like' expression.

However, Eugeo, Selka and the rest didn't show such a thing. If all the villagers in Rulid were...AIs the programmers created as boys, girls, old grannies, adults and so, in a certain sense, the STL has a very advanced Over-Technology. But in the end, I really can't imagine it actually working...

I thought about this, got up from the bed and let my feet land on the floor.

There was an old oil lamp at the wall where the top of the bed was. The orange-yellowish light flickered, giving off a strange burnt smell. Of course, I never touched such a thing in real life, but the room Asuna and I shared in Alfheim had a similar kind of lamp, so I subconsciously reached over to touch the surface.

However, there wasn't any pop-up operating window. I suddenly thought of something and used both my fingers to draw in a motion that was not a gesture command, but something called the «Stacia Seal». I then touched the surface of the lamp, and a purple glow appeared there this time. However, the lamp's durability was the only thing shown, there was no button like lights on, lights out.

Damn it. Selka would definitely not tell me the way to turn off the light that easily without nagging at me first ...Just when I was panicking, I finally found a little knob at the base of the lamp. Anyway, let's try to turn it first. Kyukyu. With a metallic sound, the wick tightened, and the lamp let off a thin trail of smoke before being extinguished. The moonlight pierced through the window, landing inside the room covered in darkness, leaving behind a silvery-white line.

I finally managed to clear this highly difficult mission, and I returned to the bedside, put my pillow in a suitable position and laid back down. I felt a little cold, so I put on the blanket Selka gave me, and soon, I just felt like sleeping.

—If they're not humans nor AIs, what are they?

In a corner of my thoughts, I already had an answer. However, it felt scary to say it out. Assuming that I'm correct — this developer called RATH has already extended its arms over to the realm of god. When compared to this, the process of using the STL to understand human soul is already at a level where they're merely playing with the key to Pandora's Box with their finger.

I entered dreamland and listened to the voice deep inside my consciousness.

Now's not the time to look for an escape. I have to head to the capital. Once I go there, I'll find the reason why I exist in this world...

KLANG!!

I seemed to hear a bell from far away.

Just when I treated it as a sound in my dreams, my shoulder just felt like it was being nudged by someone, so I nudged my head into the blanket and grumbled,

"Uu— Another 10 minutes...no, 5..."

"No way. It's already time to wake up."

"3 minutes...just 3 minutes will do..."

Just as my shoulders continued to shake, a slight sense of disorientation caused me to lose my sleepiness. If it were my younger sister Suguha waking me up, she wouldn't be using such a slow action, but would be yelling, tugging at my hair, pinching my hair, pinching my nose and doing all sorts of violent acts, or even the devilish act of pulling away the futon.

At this moment, I realized that where I am now is neither reality nor Alfheim, and I poked my face out from the wool blanket. I widened my eyes slightly and exchanged looks with Selka, who was in a neat nun habit. This apprentice Sister lowered her head and looked at me.

"It's 5.30. The kids have all woken up and washed up. If you don't hurry, you won't be able to make it for Worship."

"...Okay, I'll come over..."

I left aside the warm bed and the peaceful rest without regrets and sat up. I looked around, and it's just like my memory from the previous night. This is the guest room in the second floor of the Rulid church. In other words, my body went through the virtual world Underworld that was created by the Soul Translator. Such an amazing experience doesn't look like it'll end in one night.

"So it only seemed like a dream, huh?"

"Eh, what?"

On hearing me mutter this phrase, Selka gave a surprised expression. On seeing this, I hurriedly shake my head.

"It, it's nothing. I'll get changed and come over. It's the worship hall on the first level, right?"

"Un, even if you're a guest or a lost child of Vector, you have to pray to the god of Stacia as long as you stay in the church. Every single cup of water is a blessing of god's grace, and we have to be grateful to this. That's what Sister told us..."

She'll continue rattling on and on if this keeps up, so I hurriedly got off the bed. I flipped this thin shirt, preparing to take off the pajamas I borrowed, and Selka let out a frantic sound.

"It, it'll start in 20 minutes. Don't be late! You must wash your face in the well's water out there!"

Patapata, she walked out of the room and quickly closed the door before vanishing from my sight. This reaction is obviously not something an NPC can do...I thought as I took off my shirt and brought the «Initial Equipment» lying on the chair, the blue short-sleeved tunic to my head. I brought it up to my nose and sniffed at it, only to find that there's no sweat. As expected, microorganisms and other things like that can't be replicated. Maybe defects like stains or holes are controlled by the durability value called «Life».

On thinking about this, I pulled out the «Window» attached to the tunic, and the durability was shown as the words [44/45]. Looks like it doesn't matter for a short time, but if I want to stay in this world for a long time, I have to find a change of clothes and so I have to find a way to get items and money.

I continued to think as I changed my clothes, then walked out of the room.

I walked down the stairs and out of the back door beside the kitchen. The beautiful sunrise was already over my head. She said that it's still not six yet but how do the residents in this world tell the time? I can't see anything like a clock, whether it's in the cafeteria or the living room.

I lowered my head and stepped onto the stone path. I soon saw a well chiseled from stone. The kids seemed to have used it already as the surrounding moss patch was already wet. I opened the lid, threw the wooden basket with the rope attached to it down, and a nice kalakalapon sound could be heard. I pulled the rope and lifted up a full pail of the wells transparent water into the tray beside me.

I scooped up the wells icy cold water with my hands to wash my face and also drank a mouthful of it. At this moment, my sleepiness was shaken away completely. I think I slept before 9 yesterday, and even though I woke up early, I should have slept for 8 hours... On thinking about this, I sank into deep thought again.

If this is Underworld, the FLA mechanism is probably still working. If the rate is three times, my actual sleep time should be less than 3 hours. If it's a fantastical idea like what I had yesterday such that it's accelerated to 1000 times, it'll mean that 8 hours is actually the equivalent of less than 30 seconds. Can such a short time really cause the mind to be so awake?

Really, I don't understand at all. I must get away from here as fast as possible and check the situation... However, the soft voice when I was about to sleep continued to echo in my ears.

I was able to wake up in this world with the consciousness of Kirito—Kirigaya Kazuto. Whether it's because of some irregular incident or a certain person's will, I probably exist here to complete a mission, I guess? I'm not some theorist on life, but on the other hand, I don't deny that every single existence has a certain purpose. If that's the case, why is it that so many people lost their lives in the SAO incident...

Bashaa! I again scooped up another handful of the wells water and splashed it on my face to interrupt my thoughts. Right now, I have two courses of action. First, I can investigate if there are any RATH workers who know how to log out from here, and second, I have to find a way to the capital in order to discover the purpose I exist in this world.

The former's not that complicated to me. I'm not sure about the FLA rate, but with a RATH technician disguised as a villager, they probably won't stay here for years, even decades. In other words, if residents who left this place on business trips or holidays do exist, it means that they're very likely to be observers.

As for the latter — to be honest, there's no real good way to go about with this. Eugeo said before that riding a horse from here to the capital will take about a week and if we walk by the shortest route, it'll take three times the time. If possible, I really want to get a horse, but there's still no way to go about getting one, and I have no equipment or funds for the trip. Also, I really lack knowledge about this world, and I need a guide. I feel that Eugeo's the best choice, but he has a «Sacred Task» that he can't complete in his lifetime.

I might as well break the Taboo Index and get arrested by that knight or something to make things faster. However, I'll most probably be taken away to the jail cell directly, and I'll have to endure a few years of manual labor, having to carry lots of stone slabs. That will require quite some endurance. But before that, I may be sentenced to death.

Then, I had better ask Eugeo whether the sacred arts have some release or revival spells. Just when I'm thinking about this, Selka pokes her head out from the back door of the church and on seeing me, shouted at me,

"KIRITO, HOW LONG ARE YOU GOING TO KEEP BATHING!? WORSHIP'S STARTING!!"

"Ahh, un...sorry, I'll come over now."

I hurriedly raised my hand, put the cover of the well and the basket back and hurriedly returned to the building.

After going through the solemn worship and the noisy breakfast, the kids all went out to do cleaning and washing clothes, while Selka and Sister Azariya headed towards the library to learn the same sacred arts. To me, who's basically living here for free, this caused quite some guilt in me. I harbored such feeling as I walked out of the church's gate and headed towards the central plaza for Eugeo to come back.

A few minutes later, a familiar profile with flax-colored hair appeared from the direction of the disappearing morning glow. Then, the clock tower behind the church chimed a simple yet elegant melody.

"Ahh...I see."

On hearing what I said the moment I met him, Eugeo widened his eyes in surprise.

"Morning, Kirito. What do you mean by 'I see'?"

"Morning, Eugeo. Well, it's just that...I found that every melody of the bell's different for every hour. In other words, the villagers here uses this to tell the time."

"Of course, that's how it is. The songs of praise for the «Light of Solus» are divided into 12 rhythms. At every half point, there'll be a chime. Unfortunately, the sound can't reach Gigas Cedar, so I can only check the time through the height of Solus."

"I see... so that means there are no clocks in this world."

I carelessly let out these words, and Eugeo tilted his head slightly.

"Clock...? What's that?"

This is bad. Don't tell me such a term doesn't exist here? I gave off a cold sweat inside my heart and tried to explain.

"Erm, a clock is...a tool that's a round plate with numbers on it and has rotating needles to point the time..."

On hearing that, Eugeo's face unexpectedly gave a shine and nodded.

"Ahh...that. I saw it in the picture books when I was young. A long time ago, the center of the capital seemed to have a building called a «Divine Instrument of Engraved Time», but people often looked up at that divine instrument and never got to work seriously, which angered god, who destroyed that divine instrument with lightning. From then on, humans could only denote the time through the bell chimes."

"He, heh...well, I'm always worried about the time when classes are about to end..."

I said such careless things I didn't think through again, and luckily, I managed to pass safely this time.

"Ahaha. That's how it is. When I was learning at the church, I was always waiting for the noon bell to ring."

Eugeo chuckled as he looked away. I followed his line of sight and finally saw the clock tower of the church. In the window that's designed as a coin-shaped chamfer, bells of all sizes were all shining inside. However, even though the bells were ringing, no one could be seen there.

"That bell...how exactly does it ring?"

"...Really, Kirito, how can you forget about that?"

Eugeo said with a stunned yet delighted voice, coughed midway through, and continued,

"There's no need for anyone to go ring it. This is the only Divine Instrument in the village. Every day, it will regularly ring hymns of praises without missing by a second. Of course, it's not just Rulid village that has this. Zakkaria and the other villages and towns all have them... ahh, but, it's not just that it is the only Divine Instrument..."

The energetic Eugeo trailed off, which was very rare, and finally lost his voice at the end, which caused me to frown. However, Eugeo didn't look like he wanted to continue discussing about this as he clapped his hands lightly and said,

"Now, I have something I have to do. What plans do you have today, Kirito?"

"Well..."

I pondered for a while. Though I really want to venture through the village, I might get into trouble if I was alone. If I can ask Eugeo about whether there are villagers who went out just like I imagined and in order to try and coax Eugeo to head to the capital to accomplish my cruel plan, I have to find out what Eugeo's Sacred Task is.

"...If possible, let me help you out today, Eugeo."

After thinking this through, I said such words, and Eugeo grinned and nodded.

"Of course I'll gladly bring you along. I thought you'd say so too, Kirito. Look, I brought money for buns enough for two."

He took out two bronze coins from his shorts, and they let out a clang on his palm.

"Erm, well, I'm really worried about bothering you there."

After seeing me shake my head and hands, Eugeo shrugged and smiled.

"You don't have to worry. I earn my pay from the village workplace, and there's nothing I can actually spend it on, so I can only save up."

Oh, that's good, really good. In that case, I have money to go to the capital. My mind started to have such a meaningless thought. Right now, all that's left is for Eugeo to finish his Sacred Task and cut down the giant tree.

My heart is thinking of such a cunning plot, but I showed an apologetic look. On seeing me like this, Eugeo still maintained his smile and said, 'Let's go' before walking southwards. I followed him from behind and then looked back and up to the bell tower that would automatically chime every hour.

This was really an amazing world. Even though it created a realistic rural life, the presence of a VRMMO still couldn't be shaken off. In the main streets of all the floors in the floating city Aincrad, there was a bell that indicated the hour.

Sacred arts — and the Axiom Church; these are most likely fake names for spells and the world's system. If that's the case, how can we explain the «Land of Darkness» that exist outside this world? Is it a counter-system...

While I was in deep thought, Eugeo, who was beside me, arrived in front of what looked like a bread shop and greeted the old lady boss with an apron before buying four buns. I looked inside the shop, and saw that a man dressed like a shopkeeper was kneading the bread. The aroma inside the place floated out through the large window.

In an hour, or maybe 30 minutes, I can buy bread that's freshly baked, but being unable to be flexible here is probably part of the «Sacred Task». Eugeo's job to reach the forest and swing the axe has a fixed timing that can't be changed easily. As I can only get him to accompany me on this trip once he completes the «Sacred Task», my plan won't be accomplished that easily.

But no matter what, the system always has loopholes. Even someone like me of unknown origin and identity is going to work with him as an assistant.

We moved through the arch to the south and stepped on the path passing through the green wheat fields as we headed towards the forest deep inside. From here, I could clearly see the giant tree Gigas Cedar that reached the skies.

Eugeo and I continued to exchange turns swinging the Dragon Bone Axe hard, and unknowingly, the sun called Solus had already risen to its noon position.

I continued to move my arms that were feeling as heavy as lead and swung the 500th swing deep into the monstrously large tree. KOONG! The large tree let out sawdust that scattered like sand, which showed that the extremely large durability value of the tree was slightly worn out.

"Uwahh, can't do it. I can't swing anymore."

I cried out and threw the axe into the ground before lying on the mossy patch as if my power was short-circuited. I received the water bottle Eugeo handed over to me and greedily gulped down the sweet liquid called «Siral Water» — I still have no idea what language this is.

Eugeo just smiled in a carefree manner as he looked down at me who's like this now before saying with a teacher-like tone,

"But you really have quite the talent, Kirito. It's true. You managed to grasp the basics after just two days."

"...But I still can't catch up to you at all, Eugeo..."

I sighed and adjusted my sitting position, leaning with the Gigas Cedar against my back.

As I had been swinging the heavy axe for the entire morning, I've gotten a rough grasp of my stats in this world.

I already knew it, but the stats are far inferior to the superhuman-class strength and agility the swordsman Kirito possessed in the old SAO. Even so, it's possible that the weak Kirigaya Kazuto in the real world was used as reference. If it's the me in the real world, once I swing such a heavy axe for an hour like this, I'll definitely have muscle pains all over the place and be unable to get up on the second day.

In other words, my current strength now is about the average value of a 17, 18 year old young man in this world. Eugeo's strength far exceeds mine, as expected of someone who's been working on this for 7 years.

Luckily, the feeling of the avatar or the imagination power is still the same or even more efficient than the VRMMOs I played before. Besides, having swung the axe several hundred times while being aware of the weight and trajectory, I finally have the confidence to wield this axe which needs a tremendous amount of strength.

Also, I've done such repeated practices of the same routine countless times in the old Aincrad, even skipping sleep and meals to do so, so this might be the area I'm best at. At least I won't lose to Eugeo in terms of determination—

No...wait. I think I just missed out something important there...

"Then, Kirito."

Eugeo tossed me two round buns, which interrupted my train of thought. I hurriedly reached for them with my hands.

"...? What's wrong? You have a weird expression on your face, you know?"

"Ah...no..."

I finally managed to grasp the end of this trail of thought that was about to leave me, but the remaining fragment only gave a vague and puzzling impression that I was thinking of something important. Well, if it's important, I'll think of it at some point. I then shrugged my shoulders and thanked Eugeo,

"Thanks. I'll take these then. Itadakimasu."

"Sorry that the bread is the same as yesterday."

"It's nothing, it's nothing."

I opened my mouth to take a large bite. The taste was good— but to be honest, it was still too hard. Eugeo probably felt the same way as he frowned and tried his best to move his lower jaw.

Both of us continued to spend several minutes eating the first bun and as we exchanged looks with each other, we gave each other slight smiles. Eugeo drank a gulp of Siral water and looked afar.

"...I really want to let you try out Alice's pie, Kirito... crispy skin, filled with juicy filling... having it together with freshly squeezed milk, making me feel that it's a rare delicacy in this world..."

As he said this, my tongue inexplicably seem to taste the pie as I drooled. I hurriedly took a bite off the second bun and asked without thinking,

"Then, Eugeo. That person... Alice, she was taught sacred arts in the church, right? To become the successor to Sister Azariya."

"Un, that's how it was. She was hailed as the first prodigy since the village was built, and she could use a large number of arts at the age of ten."

Eugeo said with a proud tone.

"Then... the girl learning in the church now called Selka is..."

"Un... Sister Azariya was really devastated when Alice was taken away by the Integrity Knight and said that she wouldn't take in any more disciples. However, the village chief Gasupht managed to convince her and two years ago, the new apprentice Selka joined the church. She's Alice's little sister."

"Little sister... heh..."

If I have to say it, she should be a stern big sister. I remembered Selka in my mind who gave such an impression as I said this. Since this Alice is her older sister, she must have loved to take care of others and been a busybody as well. She should be able to become a good couple with Eugeo.

I thought about this as I glanced at Eugeo. He seemed to have thought of something as he frowned.

"...As our age difference is 5 years, I haven't played much with Selka. When I went over to Alice's house from time to time, she often hid behind her mother or grandmother shyly... her father Gasupht, everyone and even Sister Azariya all believed that Alice's little sister had the talent in sacred arts and were looking forward to it... however..."

"Selka didn't have the talent like her sister's, right?"

On hearing my direct question, Eugeo merely grimaced and nodded.

"We can't really say that though. No matter who that person is, when starting with a Sacred Task, they can't possibly do it well. It's the same for me and I only managed to wield this large axe properly after more than 3 years. With perseverance, no matter what kind of Sacred Task it is, it can finally be mastered one day. It's just that... for Selka who's only just 12 years old, she's been working a little too hard..."

"Too hard?"

"...At the time Alice started learning the sacred arts, she didn't stay in the church. She only studied till noon, and then handed the bento over to me before going off to help with housework in the afternoon. But Selka used the reasoning that she didn't have enough time to study and moved out of the house. It just so happened that Jana and Algu moved into the church, and the Sister herself definitely couldn't handle them, so Selka probably also had such a reason for moving to the church."

I remember seeing Selka who was seriously taking care of the children. I can't tell how tough it was, but for a twelve-year-old who has to study and take care of 6 kids, it's probably not easy.

"I see...and I, a «Vector's lost child» suddenly moved there. At least I shouldn't bring trouble about for Selka."

I definitely have to wake up at 5.30 from tomorrow on. With such resolve, I continued the topic just now by saying 'now that you say so'.

"The kids other than Selka living in that church all lost their parents? Their parents are dead? How did six people get this at the same time in such a peaceful village?"

On hearing this question, Eugeo looked slightly depressed, and lowered his head to look at the mossland growing not too far away.

"...It happened 3 years ago. There was an epidemic in the village that was unseen of for almost 100 years, causing 20 people of all ages to die. Sister Azariya and the pharmacist Ivenda tried all sorts of means, but couldn't cure those people with fevers. The kids in the church lost their parents just like that."

This unexpected answer caused me to go silent.

—A contagion? But this is the virtual world. No bacteria or virus can possibly exist here. In other words, the people who died because of the

virus were causing out of some intention by the people controlling this world or the system. However, why is that so? Most likely, they want to use some form of calamity on the residents to create some form of burden on them, but why carry out a simulation of such a thing?

In the end, everything points in one direction. That's the reason why this world exists—

"It's not just epidemics though. Recently, there have been a lot of weird things going on. Stray long-clawed bears, black-furred wolves attacking people in packs, the buds of wheat unable to expand... even the regular horse carriage travelling from here to Zakkaria may not show up for months. The reason is said to be... that Goblin tribes appeared there."

"Wha, what did you say?"

I blinked a few times.

"Goblins... wait, aren't there knights protecting the boundary of the country?"

"Of course they are. The dark tribes that are near the Mountain range at the Edge should be instantly wiped up by the Integrity Knights. This is a duty the Integrity Knights have to fulfill, because those tribes are guys that are a lot worse than Alice, who only touched a little of the land of darkness."

"Eugeo..."

I felt that Eugeo's steady voice suddenly had what can be considered a somber tone, which shocked me. However, that feeling immediately vanished as the boy's lips slowly showed a smile again.

"...That's why I only treat those as rumors. But during the past 2 or 3 years, there were a lot of new tombstones. Jii-chan said that this situation is normal."

Speaking of which, now is the time to ask that question. I pretended that nothing was up and cautiously asked,

"...I say, Eugeo. sacred arts... can they revive people?"

He just shoot me a look of disbelief again. Unexpectedly, Eugeo bit his lips slightly with a serious expression and nodded while looking like he's not really certain either.

"...Almost everyone in the village doesn't know of this, but amongst the highest levels of sacred arts, there's a spell that can increase lifespan. That's what Alice said."

"Increase... Life?"

"Un, all people and items' lives...including yours and mine, can't be added on normally, Kirito. For example, the Life of a human continues to increase from a baby to a toddler until the adult stage, and the maximum Life is about 25 years. After that, it will slowly decrease and become 0 at around 70, 80 before being called back to Stacia. You forgot about all this, Kirito?"

"Ah, ahh."

Of course, this is the first time I'm hearing this as I cautiously nodded. What Eugeo's saying is probably that the maximum value of Hit Points will increase and decrease with age.

"However, if a person is sick or wounded, their Life will drop greatly. If the injuries are too grave, one may die just like that. However, one can recover Life by using sacred arts and medicine, even though it won't exceed the maximum value. An old person can't regain the Life he had when he's young no matter how much medication he takes, and those with wounds too severe can't recover..."

"But there's a spell to do such things, is that right?"

"Alice said that she was really shocked when she saw this in the ancient books. She asked this question to Sister Azariya, and only saw her make a very horrified expression and told her to forget everything she saw... so I'm not so sure about the specifics. However, it's said that that's a spell that can only be used by the Great Priests of the Axiom Church, and isn't a spell used for healing or curing illnesses, but directly affects the life... or something like that. Of course, I've never seen the specific spell at all or something."

"Heh... Great Priest? That means that the monks of the church can use sacred arts?"

"Of course. The source of power behind the sacred arts is the «Sacred Power» God Solus and God Terraria scattered throughout the skies and earth. Large spells require a large amount of Sacred Power. If it's a really powerful spell that can control a human's life, it won't be enough even if all

the Sacred Power in this forest is gathered. I suppose not even Zakkaria town has a spellcaster that can control such large power.

Even so; he paused here for a while, and then continued with a low voice,

"And...if Sister Azariya could use that kind of spell, she won't see those kids' parents and those parents' kids die like that."

"I see..."

—In other words, even if I die here, I won't return back to the altar in the church and wake up with a beautiful organ sound. If I die, I'll probably wake up in the STL in real life. No, if that's not the case, I'll be really bothered. The STL doesn't have the capability to destroy Fluctlights— probably. It should be different from Nerve Gear.

However, trying death should be the final means to leave this place. The existence of Underworld is already a sure thing inside my mind, and even if I know of this, is it really alright for me to leave without knowing my purpose in this world— my soul's giving off such a voice to me from deep inside.

I really want to get sent to the capital and barge into the headquarters of the Axiom Church or something and ask all sorts of questions in my mind to the «Great Priests», but I have no way to do this. No transport can be taken from town to town, and there really should be a limit to this lack of play ability. Even that SAO had transfer gates in almost all the cities.

If this were an ordinary VRMMO, I might consider sending a mail of complaint to the operator. However, if I can't do so, I'll just have to try my hardest as long as the system allowed me. Yes, I did think this often during the boss conquest battles in Aincrad.

Having finished the second bun, I put the water bottle Eugeo handed over to me at my mouth, drinking up as I looked up at this large tree trunk that reached the skies.

I have to get Eugeo to help me if I have to head towards the capital, but it's probably impossible to make him give up on his duty seriously, since that is probably forbidden by the Taboo Index. In that case, there's only one way, and that's to find a way to deal with this overly large cedar.

I turned back to look, and saw Eugeo pat his pants before standing up.

"Alright, time to get started with our work in the afternoon. I'll start first. Can you hand me the axe?"

"Ahh."

I used my right hand to hold onto the handle of the Dragon Bone Axe beside me and was about to hand it over to Eugeo.

Suddenly, a strong electric shock-feeling flashed in my mind. The tail end of the thing that was about to escape my palm seemed to be caught back, so I cautiously thought.

Eugeo did say that an ordinary axe would have its blade easily shattered, which was why they went to the capital to order this large Dragon Bone axe.

In that case, we just needed a more powerful axe. We'll use one with more attack power and durability that required more strength.

"I, I say, Eugeo."

I held my breath and asked.

"Is there a stronger axe in this village? Even if it's not in this village, if it's in the town of Zakkaria...it's been three hundred years since you ordered this axe, right?"

But Eugeo just shook his head.

"How can there be one? Dragon bone is the highest grade material for weapons. It's harder than the Damask metal in the south and gem metal in the East. If there's anything harder, it'll be the ones the Integrity Knights use... the Divine Instruments..."

The tail end of these words faded off with the trembling voice, so I tilted my head and waited for the back part of the content. After about 5 seconds of silence, Eugeo whispered as if he was worried about the surroundings.

"...There's no axe, but... there's a sword."

"Sword...?"

"I mentioned in front of the church that there's another Divine Instrument beside the «Clock that Tells the Time», do you remember?"

"Ah...ahh."

"In fact, it's near this place... and I'm the only one who knows about this. During these six years, I've been hiding it from everyone... do you want to see it, Kirito?"

"Of, of course! I want to. Please show it to me!"

I said with enthusiasm, but Eugeo still looked like he was hesitating. He soon nodded though, and handed me the axe.

"Then, please start the afternoon work, Kirito. It'll take quite some time to take it out."

"Is it far away?"

"No, it's just inside the storage shed nearby, but... it's unexpectedly heavy."

It's just like what Eugeo said as once I finished the 50th swing, he finally returned, looking rather tired and his forehead was sweating profusely.

"O, oi, are you okay?"

On hearing this, Eugeo, who had lost the strength to answer, simply nodded and tossed the object he's been carrying on his shoulder onto the ground. DONK. With a blunt sound, the moss carpet had a large dent in it. I handed over the canteen containing the Siral water over to the panting Eugeo and started to stare at the thing on the ground.

I seemed to have seen it before. It was a long and thin leather bundle that was 1.2m long. Undoubtedly, this is the packaged item that was randomly placed inside the hut when Eugeo was putting the dragon axe aside.

"Can I open it?"

"Ah...ahh. Be...careful though. If it lands on your leg, you won't be just...hurt there."

The panting Eugeo said. I nodded at him and carefully reached my hand out.

After that, my waist just felt a shock like it's about to be snapped. No, even if it's reality, my waist would really dislocate for real. Seriously, this packaged item is really heavy. I'm holding it with both hands, but it just won't budge as it seems to be nailed to the ground or something like that.

My sister Suguha has been training in the kendo club and is already monstrously muscular, so I have to say that she's a lot heavier than she

looks —of course, I can't say these thoughts of her— and without being over-exaggerating, this wrapped item makes me feel like it's like her in that sense. I steadied my legs again and exerted strength from my waist to utilize all my power like I was raising dumbbells.

"Fuu...!"

Mishi mishi. I felt that the joints all over me seemed to be rubbing, but the package finally started to move. I lifted the part with the rope knot on it and turned it 90 degrees before letting the bottom end of the item rest on the ground. I used my left hand to support it with all I had without letting it fall. My right hand undid the knot of rope tied around it and moved the leather cover down.

Inside it is a long sword that's so beautiful that even I can't help but be amazed by it.

The sword hilt was delicately crafted with silver, and the handle was carefully wrapped fully with white leather. The Knuckle guard was decorated with foliage, and it's obvious what kind of plant was used. Whether it's the top of the handle or the white leather scabbard, they're all covered with a sparkling rose that's carved out from jade.

It gave off an antique vibe, but didn't have any stains on it at all. It's like it's been sleeping all this time without being able to meet its owner — this sword gave me such a feeling.

"This is...?"

I lifted my head to ask, and Eugeo, who finally recovered, looked at that sword with a nostalgic expression and said,

"«Blue Rose Sword». I don't know its real name, but that's the name that was used in fairy tales."

"Fairy tales...?"

"Any kid from Rulid village... no, even the adults know this — 300 years ago, amongst the initial pioneers who settled this land, there was a swordsman named Bercouli. There were many legends about his adventures, but the most famous of them is «Bercouli and the Northern White Dragon»..."

Eugeo suddenly looked far away and continued on with a sad expression,

"...Simply put. Bercouli went to the mountain range at the edge and lost his way deep inside the cave, which caused him to fall into the white dragon's cave. The white dragon guarding the human world was having a nap and Bercouli took the chance to escape. However, amongst the pile of treasures that were scattered inside the cave, there was a sword he wanted to get no matter what. He took the sword silently and was about to leave, but a blue rose suddenly grew out and tangled Bercouli. He fell, and the sound woke the white dragon... that's how the story was."

"Wha, what happened next?"

I can't help but be attracted by this story, and so I asked. Eugeo said that it's a long story as he smiled and continued on with this,

"Anyway, a lot of things happened, and Bercouli was finally forgiven. He put the sword back and escaped to the village. That's really something worth being happy about... but really a boring story. If only we didn't have the urge to check whether it was real during our childhood..."

The voice seem to have a thick sense of regret, and I finally realized that the 'our childhood' refers to Eugeo and his childhood friend, the girl called Alice. In this village, the only kids with such mobility would be them.

After a moment of silence, Eugeo continued.

"6 years ago, Alice and I went to the mountain range at the edge to search for the white dragon, but we didn't find it. What we saw was a hill of bones with a blade slash."

"Eh...dra , no, did someone kill the dragon? Who, exactly...?"

"I don't know. Maybe some people... were interested in the treasure. There were a lot of gold and treasures scattered all over the place. This «Blue Rose Sword» was amongst them as well. Of course, I didn't take it as the sword was heavy... —and on the way home, we went through the wrong exit, passed through the mountain range and entered the dark world. What happened next is just like what you heard."

"I see..."

I turned my eyes to the hands supporting the sword.

"But... this sword, why is it here?"

"...During summer two years ago, I went to the cave in the north again and took it out. I moved it for several kilolu every day on my rest days and hid it inside the forest... until I moved it into the storage shed. It took me 3 months and as for why I did this...to be honest, I don't know either..."

He probably still can't forget about Alice? Or maybe he wanted to wield this sword to save her.

Such a thought flashed through my mind, but my respect for this boy called Eugeo didn't allow me to simply say these words. I regained my momentum and raised the sword, using my right hand to hold onto the hilt of the sword.

I thought that this sword that's stabbed deep inside the ground like a pillar would be hard to move with so much resistance, but I just moved it slightly, and the blade itself slid out from the scabbard smoothly. Swoosh. With that crisp sound, the sword was drawn, and I felt a lot of weight from the right shoulder to the wrist. I hurriedly threw aside the scabbard in my left hand and used both hands to hold onto the sword.

The scabbard looked like it was made of metal, but seemed to have a lot of weight as it stabbed into the ground with a thud. It nearly hit my left foot, but I didn't have the time to back away as I continued to maintain the sword's balance.

Luckily, the sword was 3 times lighter once I took off the scabbard, and I could continue to maintain this for a while. I continued to look at the blade of the sword in a seemingly attracted manner.

It's really an inexplicable material. The slightly metallic object that was only 3.5 cm wide gave off a light blue glow as it reflected the sunlight shining through the leaves. Looking closely, the blade reflected off the sunlight with the image surface, and some of the light seemed to remain on the inside of the blade, giving off a diffused reflectance. Anyway, it just looks somewhat transparent.

"This isn't an ordinary metal nor silver. It's different from dragon bone too, and obviously not glass..."

Eugeo said with a slightly awestruck tone,

"—In other words, this isn't something made by human hands... that's what I feel. It's made by a powerful Sacred Arts caster borrowing the power of god, or something that may be made by a god... such an item is called a

«Divine Instrument>. This Blue Rose Sword is definitely a Divine Instrument too."

—God.

The names «Solus» and «Stacia» that Eugeo and Selka often talked about, the names that often appear in the Sister's prayers; these should be a setting in this fantasy world, and I didn't pay too much attention to that as I made such a decision.

However, with the appearance of a god created weapon or something like this case, I felt that I have to reconsider this. The gods of the virtual world — would that mean the people managing from the real world or the main process in the server?

This seemed to be a question that can't be answered no matter how I think. Even right now, I can only feel that this Axiom Church is an existence similar to the «Central System».

Anyway, this sword should have quite the high priority level given by the system, and now we have to compare it with the Gigas Cedar priority and see which priority level is higher — this outcome will decide whether I can go to the capital with Eugeo.

"Eugeo, can you check on the Life of the Gigas Cedar?"

I continued to wield the sword as I said this and Eugeo gave me a doubtful look.

"Don't tell me, Kirito...you intend to use this sword to hit the Gigas Cedar?"

"If you moved it here, is there any other reason why?"

"That's true... but..."

I continued to say things to Eugeo, who had his head down, to convince him not to hesitate.

"Or does the Taboo Index has a clause that states that you can't use a sword to chop the Gigas Cedar down?"

"No...about this, it didn't mention at all..."

"Or did the village chief, or the predecessor... Garitta jii-san said that you can't use anything other than the Dragon Bone Axe?"

"No... he didn't mention... I feel... something like this happened before..."

Eugeo muttered, but still got up to stand in front of the Gigas Cedar. He drew a seal with his left hand and knocked on the tree trunk, staring at the window that appeared

"Well, 232,315."

"Alright. Remember this number."

"But Kirito. You can't possibly wield that sword properly. You're being unstable just by wielding it now."

"Anyway, just watch. You don't use strength to lift a heavy sword, you use the center of gravity."

It was a memory from a long time ago, but in the old SAO, I liked swords with weight. I preferred the feeling of using one hit to smash an enemy more than weapons that relied on speed and continuous attacks to win. As my level increased and my strength stat rose, the weight of the sword in my hand would continue to decrease. That's why I continued to change swords — the first time I wielded the swords that became my last partners felt like how it is right now as I wield the Blue Rose Sword. Also, the old me had a sword in each hand as I continued with such manual labor-like intensity.

Of course, the basis of the world system is different here, so I can't simply use the same method. However, my impression of the body movement should work here. Eugeo waited slightly far away from the tree, and I moved to the left of the cut in the tree trunk, bent down and maintained a low sword-drawing posture with the sword that caused my arms to be worn out just by maintaining it.

There's no need to carry out any continuous hits. Just a normal horizontal swing on the middle right side will do. If I have to borrow a name for this sword skill in SAO, it would be «Horizontal». It's a basic skill that could be learnt at the beginning of the game.

I adjusted my breathing and moved my weight onto the right foot before moving the sword back slightly. I lifted my left foot up due to the inertial weight of the sword. It looked like I'm about to end up sitting down on my butt, but I have to fight this no matter what until the sword tip reaches the target. I stamped my right foot on the ground and shifted my weight to the left side of my body, converting the strength in the swinging motion inside

the legs and waist from the hands to the tip of the waist, and I carried out my horizontal swing.

The sword lets out a glow, and even though it doesn't accelerate on its own, my body still traces the posture for a sword skill perfectly. Let the left foot landing on the ground create a tremor, move the large and heavy sword and use the inertia that's not forcing me back yet, and go forward with the ideal trajectory—

However, this could only be used as a demonstration. My legs were unable to stand firm, and the blade itself hit the tree bark.

GIIIINNN!! A sharp sound was heard as the birds on the trees all flew off. However, I can't see all this as I couldn't endure the feedback and let go of the sword while my face had an intimate moment with the moss on the ground.

"WAH! Didn't I say this would happen already?"

Eugeo ran towards me, and with his help, I managed to sit down and spit out the moss in my mouth. Besides the face that hit the ground first, my wrists, waist and knees are all hurting so much I feel like screaming. The pain would still last for quite a while, but I continued to squeeze out such words.

"...This can't do... the status' still red..."

In the old SAO, if one equips a weapon that doesn't have the required STR, a window will pop out to state this. However, these words probably never reached Eugeo as it seemed to worry him all the more. At this moment, I hurriedly add on,

"No, that... I just lack body strength. Also, is there really a swordsman that can wield such a monstrous weapon?"

I let my shoulders sink, rubbed my right wrist and turned over. Eugeo followed me and looked behind.

Both of us are stunned.

The Blue Rose Sword, that beautiful sword that was swinging in the air is stabbed into half of the Gigas Cedar.

"...No way... just one hit can cause..."

Eugeo suddenly stood up and said with a hoarse voice while being speechless for the time being.

He tentatively reached out his right fingers to touch the intersection of the sword and the tree.

"The blade's not damaged at all...and it really cut two centimeters into the Gigas Cedar's bark..."

I endured the pain all over me and stood up, patting away the dust on my clothes.

"This, this is just to test the outcome. That Blue Rose Sword far exceeds the Dragon Bone Axe... in terms of attack power. Try looking at the life of the Gigas Cedar."

"U, un."

Eugeo nodded and again drew the seal before knocking on the bark. He looked at the window that popped out..

"...232,314."

"Wha, what!?"

This time, it's my turn to be shocked.

"Just a little? So much was cut into... why... don't tell me it won't work if it's not the axe...?"

"No, that's not the reason."

Eugeo pulled his hand back and shaked his head.

"It's that you're cutting it at the wrong place. If it's not the bark but the core that's hit directly, its life will decrease greatly. That's what I feel... and when that happens, my Sacred Task will be over... —however."

Eugeo turned away, giving a complicated expression, and bit his lips lightly.

"But that's if we can use the sword well. If it hurts just by swinging once, and if we keep missing the part we're aiming at, it'll be slower than using an axe."

"I can't do it, but what about you, Eugeo? You should be a lot stronger. Try swinging it once."

I continued to hassle Eugeo, and though he gave a hesitant look, he finally said that he'll try it and faced that tree again.

His hands held onto the Blue Rose Sword's hilt that was entrenched into the large tree and did a prying action. The blade finally left the bark of the tree, and Eugeo's upper body swayed. The tip of the blade landed on the ground, letting out a clear and crisp sound.

"It, it's really heavy. I can't do this, Kirito."

"If I can do it, you definitely can, Eugeo. The basics are about the same as swinging an axe. You need to use more of your weight than when swinging an axe. Don't just use your wrist's power. Keep your body steady."

I can't guarantee how much of the words actually reached him. Eugeo was really someone who'd been using the axe for a long time as he didn't even need a moment to understand this. His honest face became serious as he nodded and bent down to lift the sword.

After moving back slowly to lift the sword, he paused for a while, and then took a deep breath before quickly swinging the sword with tremendous speed. The right foot stepped right forward, and this series of weight lifting skills caused me to be flabbergasted. A blue trail was left behind in the air as the tip of the blade charged towards the center of the cut.

—But at the final moment, the left foot supporting his whole body weight slipped slightly. The sword that was swung, hacked a V sign at the top, and let out a deep sound and stopped. Eugeo then fell back in the opposite way, as I did, and hit the back of the thick trunk before groaning.

"Ugh..."

"O, oi, are you alright?"

I hurriedly ran over to Eugeo, who raised his right hand to show that he was alright, but was still frowning. Looking at him like this, I finally realized the truth that pain also existed in the world.

SAO, ALO, these VRMMO games that existed would send the pain that should be felt from the brain to the «Pain Absorber» unit to nullify it when the avatar's damaged. Without this, no one would go through a physical battle where their hit points are destroyed.

However, it seemed that there was no entertainment mindset here in this world. Even though the pain finally eased up, my wrists still felt a sharp pain as if I sprained them. If I get severely injured by a weapon, how painful will that be?

In Underworld, if I am to clash with other people, I'll have to make a realization completely different from now. No matter what, I was never able to imagine the pain of being hacked at by a blade with weight at all until now.

Eugeo, who is more tolerant to pain than me, used only 30 seconds before his pained expression vanished and he stood up gently again.

"Un, I still can't do it, Kirito. Our lives will decreased by a lot before we actually hit it accurately for once."

Both of us stared at the tree again. The Blue Rose Sword hit the top of the opening at a slight angle, bounced off and stabbed into the ground.

"But I think your footwork isn't bad..."

I wanted to say that Eugeo was a little indecisive, but after seeing him looking like a kid being lectured, I could only forget about it and seem to give up as I picked up the white leather scabbard that was lying on the moss. Eugeo drew the Blue Rose Sword and cautiously put it back into the scabbard in my hand. He then put it inside the leather bag, tied the rope up and put it not too far away.

Fuu, Eugeo exhaled and took up the Dragon Bone Axe beside the Gigas Cedar before shouting,

"Uwahh, this axe feels as light as a feather — alright, we dilly-dallied enough just now. Got to work hard for the afternoon."

"Ahh... sorry for making you do such a thing with me, Eugeo..."

On hearing my apology, the youth turned around and gave an innocent smile. That smile can only be described as honest.

"It's fine Kirito. I'm happy about that too. Then... I'll start with 50 first."

KON KON. The rhythmic sounds came as the axe was swung. I looked away from Eugeo, walked towards the Blue Rose Sword that was laid down and stroked the leather jacket.

I was definitely thinking in the right direction there. If I used this sword, the Gigas Cedar can definitely be toppled. However, it's just like what Eugeo said. If I swing it wildly, there'll be quite the price to pay.

Since the sword exists in this world, there should be someone in this world who can wield it at will and equip it. Eugeo and I just don't have the necessary conditions in this system.

In that case, what would the conditions be? Class? Level? Status? What exactly is it, and how should I start investigating...

"..."

On thinking about this, I opened my mouth slightly. It was due to the shock of my own slow-wittedness.

Of course, I just needed to open my status window to check it. Yesterday, I summoned a «window» on Eugeo's round bun... and I tried to turn off the lamp in the church's room; I didn't think of that at all. How stupid.

I reached my left hand out and drew the command mark from before. I pondered and tapped the back of my right hand. Just as I expected, there was a ring and a purple rectangle appearing in my sights.

Unlike the bread's window, there were many lines of words here. I subconsciously started to search the key, but I just couldn't find it no matter what.

First, there's the line [UNIT ID:NND7-6355] at the top. Unit ID; this caused me a chill, but now's not the time to dig deep into this. I kept the alphanumerical values in mind, since it should be a serial number commonly used in this world.

Below it is the Durability that could also be seen on the bread and the Gigas Cedar, the «Life» Eugeo talked about. The indicated value is [3280/3289]. Normally speaking, the left side is the current value while the right side is the maximum value. The reason why it decreased slightly may be because I just swung it wildly. I then looked down.

The next line is [Object Control Authoriy: 38]. Below it is the line [System Control Authority: 1].

These are the only things. The required experience value in an RPG, level, status indicator; there wasn't anything there at all. I bit my lips and repeated them.

"Un... Object Control Authority... this..."

The term gave me a feeling that it should be a numerical parameter related to the tool. However, I had no idea how big the parameter 38 here.

I sighed and looked up to see the back of Eugeo swinging the axe diligently. As I watched him, I suddenly had an idea, so I removed my own window and tried to check out the information on the Blue Rose Sword. I undid the rope knot slightly, showed a bit of the hilt, drew a mark and tapped it lightly.

The window that appeared showed the life value 197700 that could match the Gigas Cedar and also the thing I wanted to see. Below the life value, there's a [Class 45 Object] indicated there. There was a very high chance that this had something to do with the Control Authority I just saw. My Authority's 38, far less than 45.

I removed the window of the sword and tied the bag up before sitting beside the sword. I looked through the gaps between the leaves of the Gigas Cedar and looked up at the sky, and couldn't help but sigh. I got a lot of information, but I still couldn't wield the Blue Rose Sword. This fact itself was confirmed by the numerical value I saw just now. I probably could do it if I raised my Authority level to 45, but I couldn't find any way.

If this world used an ordinary VRMMORPG system, I will have to continuously practice or beat monsters to gain experience. I really have no idea if I have enough time to try out the former, and I haven't found a monster yet. If I met a situation of 'Getting a rare item but not at a level high enough to equip it', the normal response was to gain experience here by working here. However, I'm only left with despair if I can't find a way to raise my experience.

The MMO game is most interesting when there's no clearing website and the player has to start from the beginning and test everything out — that's what the heavy users would say, and they would definitely not say this once they returned to reality. As I'm thinking about this, Eugeo finished his 50 swings, wiped his sweat away and turned around.

"How about it, Kirito? Do you still want to swing the axe?"

"Ahh... my pain has subsided somewhat."

I staggered up with my feet and reached my right hand out to grab the Dragon Bone Axe. It was really a lot lighter than the Blue Rose Sword.

Well, let's pray that swinging the axe will increase that parameter. I thought as I wielded the axe and took it back by pulling it behind.

"Uahhh...this is absolutely paradise..."

I soaked my body that was still not used to the fatigue and soaked myself inside the warm water and couldn't help but say that out.

The bath hall of the Rulid church was built with a large bronze water tank that had burnt tiles under it and had a furnace built outside the wall to add firewood to heat the water. It really reminded me of the middle ages bathhouses in Europe. I have no idea whether it's designed as such by the creator of this world or an outcome of a self-evolution through simulation of several hundred years.

After dinner, the two females Sister Azariya and Selka used it, and after that, I entered with the other 4 boys. After some ruckus, the kids finally left. However, there was no dirt in this container full of bath water. I used both hands to raise the transparent liquid and splash it hard at my head before letting out a delayed sound. Ufuee~

At this point, I've been in this world for about 33 hours.

The FLA acceleration rate as I dive is unknown, so I can't deduce how much actual time has passed. If it's of equal rate — the same rate as reality, and if I'm missing, my family members and Asuna will be panicking.

On thinking about this, the anxiety rose up my throat, causing me to be unable to relax in the bath and frantically thought of a way to leave this place. But on the other hand, I really wanted to find out other mysteries in this world.

I, who was able to keep the memories of Kirigaya Kazuto as I arrived in this world, can only think that there's something abnormal going on. That's because my own actions alone will cause a drastic deviation in the simulation test. The researchers probably don't want to see me corrupt this grand experiment that has lasted for at least 300 years.

In other words, the moment I encountered such a shocking crisis, I may have encountered a once in a thousand chance as well. That is, I can discover the real identity of RATH — which has lots of financial power that doesn't match its size and visibility — the mysterious organization. This was the first and last chance for me.

"No... this may be, another, excuse..."

I dipped my mouth into the water, let out bubbles and said this.

Or maybe, I'm simply driven by my desire as a VRMMO player. I am driven by this absolutely foolish and immature desire to «clear» this «world»—this world that doesn't have any manual, and barge through using my own knowledge and instincts, refine my sword skills and beat lots of amazing guys to head for the goal to be the strongest.

Being strong in the virtual world, to put it simply, is a false impression created by the values of the parameters, and I thought of this many times in the past. When Heathcliff broke through my highest level dual-wielding sword skill, when I collapsed in front of the Fairy King Oberon in a very ugly state, and when I was pursued by Death Gun and wondering whether I should run away when I'm at my wits end, I gritted my teeth all the time and swore that I wouldn't make the same mistake the next time.

But at the same time, the flames burning inside me seemed like they wanted to devour me in fire. That Blue Rose Sword that I can't wield, how many people can easily wield it in this world? How strong are the Integrity Knights that protect the law and the Dark Knights of the dark world? What kind of guys are the ones at the top positions of the Axiom Church in this world...?

I subconsciously waved my right hand to break the water surface, and the water that flew hit the wall in front of me and let out a slight sound.

At the same time, a sound could be heard from the door leading to the changing room, causing me to recover.

"Arre, is anyone inside?"

I realized that it's Selka, and hurriedly stood up.

"Ah, well, it's me — Kirito. Sorry, I'll get out immediately."

"U...un. Take your time. Remember to remove the stopper of the tank when you go out and turn off the lamp. Good bye then...I'll be going back to my room, so good night."

Realizing that Selka was about to leave, I suddenly called her to stop her from behind the door.

"Ah...Selka. I have something to ask you. Are you free tonight?"

Selka suddenly stopped and remained silent for a while in a seemingly hesitant manner, but finally said in a barely audible voice,

"...A little can do. The kids in my room should be sleeping, so I'll wait in your room."

She walked over in small steps without waiting for my answer. I hurriedly got out from the tank, removed the stopper at the bottom of the tank, turned off the lamp and walked towards the changing room. Even if I didn't wipe myself with a towel, the water droplets would dry off quickly. I put on some home clothes and returned to the peaceful corridor before climbing up the stairs.

I opened the door to the guest room, and Selka, who was moving her legs as she sat on the side of the bed, lifted her head. Unlike last night, she was wearing a cotton nightgown, and her brown hair was tied in three tails.

Selka didn't show any change in expression as she took up the last glass placed on the table beside her and handed it over to me.

"Oh, thanks."

I received the drink and sat beside Selka before drinking up the icy cold well water. It felt like the water was entering my thirsty body as it seeped to the tip of my limbs drop by drop. This feeling caused me to exclaim,

"Uu—nectar, nectar!"

"Nectar? What's that?"

After that, Selka tilted her head while looking like she didn't understand. Damn it, this term doesn't exist in this world. I panicked when I realized this.

"Errm... it's something that can be said to be tasty, a water that feels like it heals once someone drinks from it... or something like that."

"Fmm... like an elixir?"

"Wha, what's that?"

"The priest-samas' holy water of blessing. You may not have seen it before, but just a small bottle of that thing can immediately recover any life that's reduced by injuries or illnesses."

"Eh..."

Since there's such a thing, why did the virus cause so many deaths? I thought about this, but realized that it's better not to ask this and remained silent. At least this world ruled by this amazingly-named Axiom Church isn't a paradise like I thought, and that's how it is.

Selka received the glass of water I returned and said with a very fast speed,

"If you have anything to ask me, please hurry. It's forbidden for me to enter a boy's room after bathing, but the guest room doesn't count. However, Sister Azariya will scold me if she knows about it."

"Well...I'm really sorry. I'll just ask then. Actually...I want to hear about your sister."

Suddenly, the slender shoulders under the white nightgown trembled slightly.

"...I don't have an onee-san."

"As in right now? I heard about it from Eugeo, about your sister, Alice..."

Before I could even finish speaking, Selka lifted her head, which surprised me slightly.

"From Eugeo? He told you about Alice nee-sama? Until where?"

"Ah...un, well... Alice studied sacred arts in this church...and six years ago, she was taken to the capital by the Integrity Knight..."

"...I see..."

Selka sighed slightly and lowered her head, whispering as she continued,

"...Eugeo, he still hasn't forgotten... about Alice nee-sama..."

"Eh...?"

"Everyone in the village...whether it's father, mother, Sister, all of them wouldn't say anything about Alice nee-sama. Her room was tidied up several years ago... as if Alice nee-sama's room never existed... that's why, I thought everyone forgot about Alice nee-sama... so Eugeo..."

"What do you mean he forgot? Eugeo really missed Alice. Because of that... if he didn't have his Sacred Task, he may have rushed to the capital."

On hearing my words, Selka remained silent for a while, and then whispered,

"Is that so... then, the reason Eugeo never smiles anymore was because what happened to Alice nee-sama."

"Eugeo... never smiles?"

"Ehh. When nee-sama was in that village, he was always smiling. It was really rare to not see him smile. I was very young back then, but I still remember clearly... however, after nee-sama went, I almost never saw Eugeo's smiling face. Also... on his rest days, if he wasn't cooped up at home, he would head to the forest, being alone all the time..."

I continued to listen as I thought inside my heart. It's true that Eugeo's someone who does things in a calm manner, but he doesn't give off an introverted aura. He was smiling quite a bit when he was talking to me when we went to the forest, were returning back to the village, and even during rest time.

The reason why he couldn't show his smile to Selka and the villagers is most likely — guilt. Alice, who was beloved and given lofty expectations towards, was taken away, and perhaps he had such guilt at being unable to do anything...? He wouldn't blame himself in front of me, an outsider when I don't know anything, so maybe that's why.

If that's the case, Eugeo's soul is definitely not created by a program. He has a real consciousness and soul like me... and the Fluctlight. During the past 6 years, he's been gravely hurt by the troubles bothering him.

I have to go to the capital. I again strengthened this thought in me. It's not just for myself as I want to let Eugeo leave the village to meet Alice and let both of them reunite. This idea continued to remain inside my mind without being able to scatter away. In that case, I have to cut down the Gigas Cedar...

"...Hey, what are you thinking about?"

Selka's words dragged me back from my thoughts. I lifted my face and said to her,

"Nothing... just thinking about something. Like you said, Eugeo really treated Alice dearly."

Just when I said those words in my heart, Selka's face seemed to tremble. The beautiful eyebrows and large eyes showed a lonely expression.

"I... see. Just as I expected."

As she dropped her shoulders and whispered such words, even a blockhead like me realized it.

"Selka... do you like Eugeo?"

"Wha... what are you saying?"

Her eyebrows curled up to show a protesting look, but her face was already so red it reached the neck. I thought she would lower her head, but she said while looking slightly tense.

"...It's just that, I can't take it... whether it was father or mother, even when they never said so, they kept sighing when they compared me to nee-sama when she's not around, and the other adults are the same. That's why I left home and moved to the church. Even when I came here... it's the same with Sister Azariya. I just feel when she's teaching me sacred arts that she would say that nee-sama just needed one time before being able to learn it — but Eugeo's not like that... but he continued to avoid me. Perhaps he would think of nee-sama when he sees me. All of this... it's not my fault! I can't even remember nee-sama's face...!"

The petite profile under the thin nightgown jerked, and to be honest, my heart was greatly touched. This may be because up till now, in a corner of my mind, I always thought that this world was going through some simulation, and even though Selka and the rest may not be programs, they were all temporary existences. I looked at this 12-year-old girl that continued to cry, and didn't know what to do as my body stiffened. Selka used her right hand to wipe the tears off her eyes.

"...Sorry. I got too agitated."

"No... it's fine. Well, if you feel like crying, I guess it's best to just cry it out."

Why am I saying such things? Even though I felt this way, this line that seemed to be from some popular idol drama in Japan in the 21st century caused Selka to smile as she nodded honestly.

"...Un, yeah. I am feeling somewhat happy. It's been awhile since I cried in front of others."

"Heh. You're rather amazing, Selka. I was crying in front of others at your age, you know."

My mind remembered the times I cried in front of Asuna and Suguha as I said this. Selka widened her eyes and looked at me,

"Well...Kirito, have you regained your memories?"

"Ah...no, no, of course not... I just have this kind of feeling... an, anyway, I'm me, and not others... that's why I feel that you just need to do what you can do, Selka."

This is yet another clichéd line. Selka pondered for a while, and then nodded her head.

"...Yeah. I... might be unable to face the fact that I have nee-sama straight in the eye..."

As I watched her say such words with a determined attitude, I really felt guilty since I will take Eugeo away from her. Just when I was thinking hard, the bell tower above us rang out a melody.

"Ah... it's 9 now. I should go back to my room. Oh yes...is that all you want to hear, Kirito?"

Selka tilted her head as she asked this, and I answered with 'No, that's enough'.

"Is that so. I'll go back then."

Selka got up from the bed and headed to the door, but after several steps, she stopped and turned,

"I say... Kirito. Do you also know why nee-sama was taken away by the Integrity Knight?"

"Eh... ahh. What about it?"

"I don't know at all. Father wouldn't say anything... I once asked Eugeo a long time ago, but he wouldn't tell me. Then, what's the reason?"

I hesitated for a slight moment, but once I remembered that reason, I just can't help but say it.

"Well... I think it's that, they went into a certain cave at the top of the river and passed through the Mountain range at the Edge, and her hand touched the land of the darkness, so that's what I heard..."

"...I see... she went through the Mountain range at the Edge..."

Selka seemed to be pondering about something, but she soon nodded and continued,

"It's a rest day to tomorrow, but prayer time is the same as usual. Remember to wake up. I don't want to wake you up."

"I, I'll try."

For an instant, Selka smiled, and then opened the door before leaving.

I heard her footsteps move further away before lying down on the bed. I really wanted to get some information on this mysterious girl called Alice, but Selka, who was only 5 or 6 back then, really didn't have any memories, as expected. What I know is that Eugeo's feelings for Alice are really great.

I closed my eyes and tried to recall the profile of that girl called Alice.

But my mind definitely couldn't picture her face, as a golden light flashed through my eyes.

The next morning, I was painfully made aware of how little I actually thought that through.

Part 4

Klang. The 5:30 bell rang, and I opened my eyes at that moment, thinking that I should do what I could do at this moment as I got off the neat bed.

I opened the window to the north, stretched my back, and took a deep breath full of cold air dyed with the color of dawn. I took a few deep breaths, and the sleepiness remaining within the back of my head disappeared completely.

I pricked my ears to listen, and the kids in the room opposite the corridor had woken up as well. I quickly changed my clothes so that I had the chance to wash myself at the well before them.

My «Initial Equipment», the tunic and cotton pants, showed no signs of obvious stains, but Eugeo said that their lives would quickly drop if I don't wash them. If that was the case, it was about time for me to consider changing my clothes. I would discuss this with Eugeo - I thought as I walked out of the back door and arrived at the well.

I took a few scoops of water from the pail and poured it into the tray, and as I bent down to wash my face, someone quickly approached me from behind. It's most likely Selka, I thought as I lifted myself up, wiping off the water on my hands as I turned around.

"Ahh...morning, Sister."

Standing over there was Sister Azariya, who was in a habit, which didn't show any sign of sloppiness. I hurriedly lowered my head, and she nodded and answered 'morning'. My heart was really shocked to see her stern lips curled up more than usual.

"Then... Sister, is there something...?"

I asked tentatively. The Sister blinked hesitantly and simply said,

"—Selka is missing."

"Eh..."

"Kirito-san, do you know anything? Selka seemed to be very close to you..."

Was she suspecting that I did something to Selka? I felt very embarrassed for a moment, but immediately felt that was not the case. In this world which had the absolute law, the Taboo Index that no one could break, the Sister probably didn't even think of a huge crime like kidnapping a girl. In other words, she felt that Selka disappeared on her own, and simply wanted to ask if I knew where she went.

"Well... no, I've never heard anything... it's a rest day today, right? Did she go home?"

I racked my still-sleepy brain as I said this, but the Sister immediately shook her head.

"Selka has never gone home ever since she came to this church two years ago. Even if she did, she would have told me so without hiding anything. She went off without even attending worship this morning. Even though—there's no rule that forbids her from doing so..."

"Then... did she go off to buy something? How are the ingredients for breakfast prepared?"

"We bought two days worth of food yesterday and stored them last night because the shops in the village are all on break."

"Ahh... I see."

At this moment, my lacking imagination reached its limit.

"...She must have had something urgent going on. She'll definitely come back."

"...It'll be good if that were the case..."

Sister Azariya continued to frown in a worried manner, but still sighed lightly in the end.

"Then, we'll wait 'till noon. If she still hasn't come back, I'll look for the people at the village council to discuss this. Sorry for bothering you. I still have to prepare for worship, so I'll take my leave then."

"Well... I'll go around nearby to look."

After watching the Sister nod, bow and leave, I poured away the water in the tray, all the while having a bad feeling about this. I remembered that I

was a little worried when I talked to Selka yesterday, but I couldn't remember what it was about. What did I say to cause Selka to go missing?

I finished the worship with anxiety in my heart, comforted the kids who were continuously asking where Selka nee-chan went to, finished my breakfast, and the girl still hadn't came back. I hurriedly cleared up the utensils for breakfast and walked out of the front door of the church.

I didn't agree with Eugeo to meet here, but as the bell rang at 8, I could still see the flax-colored hair walking into the plaza from the road in the north. I surged out, and ran towards him.

"Ya, Kirito. Good morning."

"Morning, Eugeo."

I saw Eugeo, who was smiling at me like yesterday, and simply greeted him before continuing,

"Are you resting the entire day too, Eugeo?"

"That's right, yeah. That's why I want to bring you around the village, Kirito."

"That's good, but before that, I need your help. Selka has gone missing since morning... I want to go around to look... "

"Ehh?"

Eugeo widened his green eyes, and then frowned worriedly.

"She left the church without telling Sister Azariya anything?"

"Seemed so. The Sister even said that this is the first time such a thing happened. Eugeo, do you know where Selka may have gone?"

"Where she could be, huh? Even if you ask me..."

"I told some things about Alice to Selka last night, so I want to see if there is any place she might have memories with Alice..."

At this moment, I finally realized, at a moment so late it amazed me, the truth behind the anxiety inside my heart.

"Ahh..."

"What, is there something wrong, Kirito?"

"Don't tell me... —Hey, Eugeo. You didn't tell Selka the reason Alice was taken away by the Integrity Knight when she asked you, right? Why?"

Eugeo blinked a few times, and finally nodded slowly.

"Ahh... that did happen before. Why... as for why I didn't say so... I'm not so sure about the reason... but maybe I was worrying that Selka would try to follow Alice's footsteps..."

"That's it."

I groaned softly.

"I told Selka last night about Alice touching the land of darkness... Selka must have gone to the Mountain range at the Edge."

"EEHH!!"

Eugeo's face immediately turned pale.

"That's very bad. We have to get her back before the villagers find out and chase after her... when did Selka leave?"

"I don't know. She was gone when I woke up at 5:30..."

"In this season, dawn is around 5. It's impossible to walk in the forest if she leaves earlier. In that case, 3 hours..."

Eugeo looked up at the sky and continued,

"When Alice and I went to the cave, we spent less than 5 hours on our feet while we're kids. Selka's most likely halfway there. I don't know if we can catch up if we chase after her now..."

"Got to be fast. Let's move."

I said anxiously, and Eugeo nodded hard,

"No time to get ready. Luckily, we will be moving down the river, so there's no need to worry about water. Alright... this way."

Eugeo and I walked towards the north at a speed that wouldn't cause everyone else to feel weird.

The shops were becoming sparse, and once we saw that there weren't any more pedestrians, we dashed down the stone steps at a speed where we were almost going to fall off. After spending about 5 minutes walking

towards the bridge above the river, we got past the eyes of the guard in the sentry post before running out of the village.

Unlike the wheat fields that stretched down the horizon in the south, the north of the village had a thick forest. A river circled around the hill that formed Rulid village and headed through the forests, extending out of both the north and south of the village. There was a small path with thin grass growing on the river bank.

Eugeo kept his eyes on the path that shifted to the riverside, walked for another 10 steps and stopped. He used his left hand to stop me and knelt down, using his right hand to touch some slightly tall grass.

"It's here...there are some signs that this place has been stepped on."

He muttered and quickly drew a mark to summon the «Window» of the grass.

"The Life has decreased by a little. If it were an adult, it would have been decreased a lot more. A kid definitely came by here before. Let's hurry."

"Ah...ahh."

I nodded and followed Eugeo, who was becoming faster.

No matter how far we moved, the scenery of the river on the right and the forest on the left never changed. Along the way, we passed by a lake and a slightly sloped region. It just made me feel like I had entered the «loop landscape» trap that most RPGs have. I could no longer hear the sound of the bell on the tower, and could only deduce the time from the sun that rose up bit by bit.

Eugeo and I continued to jog down the river, and if it were the me in the real world, I'd be completely breathless in less than 30 minutes. Luckily, the men in this world seemed to have a rather high average resilience, and I felt that it's more comforting than tiring to move my body. I once suggested to Eugeo to go a little faster, but Eugeo said that if we moved too fast, our life would drop quickly, and we wouldn't be able to move if we don't stop and rest for a long time.

Just like that, we kept running for 2 hours at a suitable speed, but there was still no sign of the girl in front of us. Speaking of which, based on the time now, Selka may have already reached the cave. The restlessness and anxiety spread through my mouth with a slightly metallic smell.

"I say... Eugeo."

I said as I took note not to mess up my breathing. Eugeo, who was running on the front side in front of me, turned back to look.

"What is it?"

"This is just for precaution's sake...but if Selka enters the land of darkness, will she be taken immediately by the Integrity Knight?"

At this moment, Eugeo looked like he was searching through his memory, and immediately denied it.

"No...I guess the Integrity Knight will most probably fly over to the village tomorrow morning. It was the same six years ago."

"I see... then, even if it is the worst case scenario, there's still a chance to save Selka."

"...What are you thinking about, Kirito?"

"Simple. Today, if we bring Selka away from the village, we might be able to hide from the Integrity Knight's pursuit."

"..."

Eugeo turned his face forward, remained silent, and whispered,

"How is that... possible. What about the Sacred Task...?"

"I never said that you have to come along, Eugeo."

I deliberately said with a taunting tone.

"I'll take Selka away. It was my fault for talking too much, so I'm bearing responsibility for this."

"...Kirito..."

On seeing Eugeo's face from the side showing such a hurt expression, I felt a sharp pain deep inside. However, this was to shake his sturdy «Obedient Will». Even though I'm scolding myself deep inside for using Selka's crisis, I had to make sure right this moment whether the Taboo Index was just a philosophical law or an absolute rule to the people living in this world.

After that, Eugeo slowly shook his head, several seconds later.

"No... it's impossible, Kirito. Selka has a Sacred Task too. Even if I know that the Integrity Knights are out to capture her, I can't let you go with her. And I don't think things will develop to such an extent. Selka can't possibly commit such a grave crime."

"But Alice did it."

I simply gave an example. With that, Eugeo bit his lips tightly and shook his head hard to deny it again.

"Alice... Alice was special. She was different from everyone else in the village. Even me... and of course, different from Selka too."

After saying that, he increased his pace as if he didn't want to continue talking. I followed him from behind, whispering to that girl whose name I only knew in my heart,

—Alice... what in the world are you?

To the residents, including Eugeo and Selka, the Taboo Index wasn't something that could be broken even if they wanted to. It's like people in real life being unable to break the laws of physics that states that they couldn't fly. This was something that affirmed my observation that «they were still different from me as humans even though they have real Fluctlights».

However, breaking a powerful Taboo...what kind of existence is this girl called Alice who could break such a powerful Taboo? Is she a test player like me using the STL? Or—

My feet moved on their own as I tried to piece together all sorts of thoughts in my mind. At this moment, Eugeo broke the silence.

"I see it, Kirito."

I lifted my face, and like he said, at the break of the forest, I could see greyish-white rocks lining up.

Both of us dashed down the remaining few hundred meters left and stopped at the grassy patch that became gravel. I panted in a slightly heavy manner and looked up at the scene in front of me in a dumbstruck manner.

It was not the virtual world— the change in area was really too clear-cut, causing me to think of saying such a thing. There was only a very narrow

buffer zone splitting it, and abruptly, it became a rocky mountain that was almost vertical. The amazing thing was that if I raised my hand, the places I could touch were covered with thin snow. I didn't know how tall it was, but there was pure white light flashing nearby.

The snowy mountains extended out to both left and right sides of where I stood, until I could no longer see them. It felt like they wanted to divide «this side» and «the opposite side» of this world perfectly. If this world really had a designer, I really wanted to complain that his design for the boundary was too simple.

"Is this...the Mountain range at the Edge? And on the other side is the land of darkness...?"

I whispered with disbelief. Eugeo nodded.

"I was shocked when I came here for the first time. This Mountain range at the Edge..."

"...Is so close to us now."

I sighed as I continued and subconsciously tilted my head. It was a road that had no obstacles, no split paths and a distance that could be covered in 2.5 hours just by walking faster. It was like— like it was luring us, luring the residents over to the Taboo area. Or it may be the other way around, inviting people from the land of darkness to invade...

Eugeo turned to me, who was relaxed, and said anxiously.

"Then, let's hurry. There's most likely still a 30 minutes distance between us and Selka. Once we find her and pull her back, we might be able to go back to the village while it's still bright.

"Ah, ahh... you're right."

I looked over at where he was pointing at, and I could see that the river we walked down was being sucked in —or rather, flowing out— from a protruding hole in the wall.

"Is that it..."

We jogged in. The height and width of the wall wasn't small, and on the left side of the trail of water that was flowing, there was a stone path wide enough for two people to walk side by side. The hole was completely covered in darkness, and there would occasionally be a cold wind blowing.

"Oi, Eugeo...how do we light this place?"

I had completely forgotten about the necessary items needed for exploring a cave and panicked when I said it. Eugeo nodded with an expression indicating to leave it to him, and raised a piece of grass that even I didn't know when he had picked up. What are you going to do with a bristlegrass? Just when I looked forward in a dumbstruck manner, Eugeo said with a serious expression.

"システム(System)・コール！(Call!) リット(Lit)・スモール(Small)・ロッド！(Ro

«System Call»? Just when I was startled—

The tip of the grass Eugeo grabbed onto let out a bluish-white light with a *swoosh*, and the brightness was enough to illuminate several meters of darkness. Eugeo raised it and stepped into the cave.

My surprise didn't fade at all as I hurriedly followed him and walked beside him, asking,

"Eu-Eugeo... just now, that was?"

Eugeo frowned sternly, but obviously showed a delighted expression as he answered,

"This is a sacred art, but it's just very simple. I learned this by practising hard in order to get the «Blue Rose Sword» last year."

"Sacred art... You said... stuff like 'System' or 'Lit'... do you know what they mean?"

"They... don't have any meaning, it's just a formulaic line. It's a sentence used to call god and pray for a miracle. The higher level sacred arts seem to be a lot longer than the one just now."

I see, so he just treated it as a spell without thinking of it as a form of language. I nodded away deep inside my heart. However, this spell really demanded instant effects. The designer of this world was indubitably a realistic person.

"I say... can I use it?"

It wasn't the best situation at the moment, but I still asked with a thought to try. Eugeo started pondering with uncertainty.

"I practised this spell whenever I had free time in my work, and spent a month to learn this spell. Alice said before that those with aptitude would learn it in one day, and those who don't have it will never be able to learn it in their lifetime. I don't know your aptitude, Kirito, but it might be impossible for you to learn it immediately..."

In other words, if I wanted to use magic... sacred arts, I had to practice it countless times to raise my skill level. This really wasn't something that could be mastered instantly. I could only give up for now and stare at the darkness in front of me.

The moist grey stone path was meandering forward. Icy cold wind that could cut the skin blew over at me from the front. I had an ally with me, but I didn't even have a wooden stick, let alone a sword, which really worried me.

"I say... Did Selka really come into such a place...?"

I couldn't help myself from muttering. Eugeo silently used the glowing bristlegrass to light the ground.

"Ah..."

The bluish-white ball of light showed a shallow frozen puddle. The center of the puddle was trampled upon, creating cracks all round.

I tried to step on it, and the ice let out a cracking sound as the cracks became bigger. In other words, there was someone lighter than me who had just walked on the ice not too long ago.

"I see... Guess we're right then. Really... I don't know whether she's just reckless or doesn't know fear..."

I couldn't help but mutter. On hearing that, Eugeo tilted his head in a puzzled manner.

"Actually, there's nothing much to be scared about. There's no white dragon inside this cave, not even a rat or a bat here."

"I-Is that so..."

I was again reminded that even though there were enemies, there were no attacking monsters. At least I could assume that the mountain range at the edge was inside the field area in a VRMMO.

My back that had been tensing up for some reason relaxed at this point— and at this moment.

There was a strange sound that came with the wind coming from the darkness in front of us. Eugeo and I glanced at each other. *Gii*, *gii*, that sound seemed to be some cry from a certain kind of bird or wild beast.

"Oi... What was that just now?"

"...Well... It's the first time I'm hearing this sound... Ah."

"Wha-What is it this time?"

"Do you... smell something, Kirito...?"

On hearing him say this, I tried hard to smell the incoming wind.

"Ahh... something, giving a burnt smell... and... "

The burnt-resin smell had a small underlying miasma of beasts in it. My expression changed the moment I smelled this. This really wasn't a smell that I could bring myself to relax over.

"What is this... "

Just when I forced out these words, another sound came, and I gasped.

"KYAAAAAAHHH...!!!!" and, the long dragged out voice was undoubtedly the scream of a girl.

"NOT GOOD!"

"SELKA...!"

Eugeo and I shouted at the same time as we dashed down the slippery stone path that had frozen on top.

I was unleashed into the biggest sense of danger —so huge that I couldn't recall any other situation where I had had a stronger feeling— as it struck my body like ice, numbing my limbs.

As expected, «Underworld» wasn't a complete paradise. There was a pitch black malice wrapped under the thin layer of peace. It would be illogical otherwise. This world was most likely like a giant clamp holding down all the residents in between. A certain person spent hundreds of years

unscrewing the clamp slowly, watching whether the residents would unite to resist or feebly get crushed.

Rulid village was most likely one of the closest places to the clamp. As the «final moment» continued to approach, the souls of the residents being annihilated and disappearing would continue to increase.

But I would definitely not allow Selka to become the first one. That was because I was the one who got her to this cave. I had to make sure that she would come back safely in order to take responsibility for getting her fate involved...

Eugeo and I continued to dash at full speed, relying upon the weak light of the grass. Our breathing became erratic, and whenever we inhaled, our chests would feel pain. We nearly slipped a few times, and the knees and wrists that hit the ice walls would continue to hurt. It wasn't hard to imagine that both our «lives» were decreasing. However, even if it was so, we couldn't slow down.

As we continued to move forward, the smell of burning wood and the wild stench became thicker. *Gii gii*, the sounds could be heard with the metallic sounds *gacha* *gacha*. I didn't know what kind of people were waiting in front of me, but I could easily imagine that they weren't some friendly guys.

Since I don't even have a knife on my waist at all, I should plan some strategy before heading forward cautiously... I whispered to myself as a game player, but the feeling that it was not the time for this overwhelmed me. Eugeo's face was even grimmer than mine as he quickly dashed forward with tremendous speed. No matter what, I couldn't possibly stop him.

Suddenly, there was an orange light swaying on the wall in front of us. From the reflection, it seemed that it was a rather large dome inside. My skin felt a clear prickling sensation at the enemies' presence, there were many of them— a whole lot. I prayed that Selka was fine as I stepped into the dome space with Eugeo.

I have to look around and take the most suitable option— as fast as possible.

I followed the deduction made in my mind and widened my eyes to access the situation like a wide-view camera snapping away.

Basically, the round dome was about 50m in diameter. The ground was covered by a thick layer of ice, but there was a large crack that opened in the middle, showing the bluish-black surface of water.

The orange light came from two clusters of bonfires. In black metal cages, *pacha* *pacha*, the firewood was burning away.

Also, right around the two clusters of bonfires, there was a group of things that looked humanoid but were obviously neither humans nor wild beasts, and there were more than 30 of them.

Each of them, or it should be said that every single one of them, weren't large. The head of the thing standing was only at my height, but their bodies with slightly slouched backs were rather muscular, especially the arms that looked weird and the hands that had sharp claws on the ends that looked like they could rip anything apart. They had bright leather armor on, and their waist had all sorts of fur, bones and little bags jingling there. Also— even though they were crude, I could feel power from their crafting machetes.

Their skins were dark grayish-green, and they had some light bristles growing on them. All of them were fully bald, without exception, and they were growing fur only on the side of the sharp and pointy ears, like wires. They had no eyebrows, and below the protruding forehead, there were eyes that were so big that they didn't match their body at all, all giving off a corroded yellow.

They were extremely abnormal— and also things that I had been used to seeing.

They were the low-level monsters «Goblins» that would definitely appear in RPGs I was familiar with. Having realized that, I heaved a sigh. Goblins were basically monsters used for beginners to train and gain experience, and their stats were normally very low.

However, this relaxed feeling could only last until the one that was standing closest to Eugeo and me discovered us and turned around.

My bones were frozen as well the moment I felt the expression coming out from the yellow eyes of that guy. Its eyes were showing doubt and surprise, which then changed to a cruel delight and endless hunger. That was enough to make me tremble like a small insect stuck in a large spider's web.

These guys weren't programs as well.

I realized this clearly in the midst of my overwhelming fear.

These goblins had real souls as well, of a similar nature to Eugeo and me to a certain extent, intellects born from Fluctlights.

But why—? Why was there such a thing?

During the approximate 2 days I was released into this world, I had a rough deduction on what kind of existence Eugeo, Selka and the other residents were. They were most likely «Artificial Fluctlights» kept inside some artificial medium and not saved in a living person's brain. I couldn't imagine what kind of medium could preserve a human's soul, but at least it wasn't hard to imagine that since the STL could read souls, it should be able to duplicate them.

It was really a scary thought, but the source of the duplication was most likely a new-born's Fluctlight. They could have duplicated that thing called the «Original Form of the Soul» endlessly and let them grow up from babies in this world. Other than that, there was no other hypothesis that could explain why the Underworld residents had 'Real Intellect' and 'Outnumbered the current number of STLs'. What I was scared about on the first night was that the reason why RATH challenged god was— to create a real AI, an Artificial Intelligence, and used human souls as a mould.

This aim was already 90% complete. Eugeo's foresight had already far surpassed mine, and his complex emotions already had more depth. In other words, it wouldn't be strange for RATH to end this grand yet arrogant experiment at all.

But the experiment still continued on, which showed that RATH was still not happy about the current results. What was lacking? I kept thinking about this, and maybe it had something to do with that «Taboo Index», the rule that Eugeo and the rest couldn't break.

Anyway, this assumption could explain Eugeo and everyone else's existence. They were different from me in the physical dimension, but their souls were all «human», completely the same.

But— If that was the case, what were these goblins? This strong hatred that looked like it was about to flow out from the yellow eyeballs was...?

I didn't think, and was unwilling to think that the original form of their souls were human. Maybe RATH caught a real goblin in real life and let it use the STL— this fragmented thought flashed in my mind.

The goblin and I stared at each other for less than a second, but it was enough to terrify me. As I didn't know what to do and could only stand blankly, the goblin in front of me let out a sound, *Giii*— which may be a laugh, and stood up.

And then, it spoke.

"Oi, look up! What's going on today? Another 2 white Ium brats have come running here!"

At the same time, there were cackles, *gigi*, *gigi*, coming from all over the dome. From the nearest one, the goblins all raised their machetes and stood up, giving off hungry looks.

"WHAT DO WE DO~? DO WE TAKE THEM AWAY AS WELL!?"

A goblin shouted initially. At this moment, the roar could be heard from behind, and all the goblins stopped laughing. From amidst the monsters, there was a goblin that was twice as large as the other goblins, looking like an officer-class.

This guy was equipped with scale mail, and the forehead had a decorative feather that was of primary colors. The eyes that had a tinge of red below the feather let out an overwhelming evil and icy cold-like intellect that could cause anyone to faint. The goblin leader smirked and bared its yellow untidy teeth before saying in a hoarse voice,

"We won't earn much even if we take the male Ium. Too much of a hassle. Let's just kill them all and turn them into meat."

Kill.

To what extent should I accept this term? I was lost.

I should be able to take away the possibility of real death here, where my physical body would actually take a fatal blow. These goblins couldn't possibly hurt my physical body lying in the STL in the real world.

But even so, I couldn't assume that this would be the same as an ordinary VRMMO and think that it would be just a bad status. That's because, in this world, there were no revival magic or items that existed for that purpose—

other than with the Central area of the Church. If I got killed by them here, this «Kirito» will most likely meet his end.

Then, if I died, what would happen to me, the consciousness of the main body?

Would I have woken up in the Roppongi headquarters of RATH, and had the operator Higa Takeru hand me a drink while saying 'you've worked hard'? Or would I have awakened in that forest alone? Or would I become a bodiless soul that can only watch this world being destroyed?

Also, in this situation— what would became of the fates of Eugeo and Selka if they died here?

Unlike me, who had this «personal medium» that was my brain, they, Fluctlights who were kept inside some sort of large memory installation, may disappear completely once they died... that sort of thing was possible, right?

Oh yeah... Selka, where was she?

I interrupted my thoughts and focused on the scene in front of me.

As according to the instructions of the goblin leader, the four henchmen drew their machetes as they walked over to us, slowly, carefreely, baring their teeth and cackling, looking like they really intended to kill us.

The other goblins, that totalled more than 20, showed excited expressions, all cackling with delight, *gigi*. Behind them, I finally found the one I was looking for. I couldn't see clearly in the darkness, but Selka, in her black nun habit, was lying on a crude cart. Her body was tied up with a straw rope, her eyes closed tightly, but her expression looked like she should have just passed out.

If I remembered clearly, the goblin leader just now had said that male «Ium» —possibly referring to humans— couldn't be sold even if they're taken back, so they'll be killed.

On the other hand, the girl would be sold. They intended to kidnap Selka, take her back to the land of darkness and sell her as goods. If this continued without us doing anything, Eugeo and I would likely be killed, but the fate that awaited Selka would be even crueller. I couldn't just give up and let it become a part of simulation, absolutely not. She, like me, was a human— and just a 12-year-old girl at that.

In that case, what should I do—

"There's only one choice."

I muttered. Beside me, the frozen body of Eugeo moved.

We have to save Selka no matter what, even if I have to sacrifice my temporary life.

Of course, it wasn't that simple. The difference in battle strength was too great. While the 30 goblins were all equipped with machetes and armor equipment, we didn't even have a stick in hand. But even so, we had to go. What led to this situation were my careless words in the first place.

"Eugeo."

I stared in front and quickly whispered.

"Listen up. We're going to save Selka. Don't move."

"Got it." I immediately heard the response. Just as I expected, the heart within him was rather strong.

"I'll count to three, and then we'll knock down those four at the front to break through them. Our sizes are different, and we'll definitely succeed if we're not scared. I'll take the left, you take the right, and we'll throw the fires into the lake. Don't throw away the lit grass. Once the flames are out, pick up a sword from the ground and cover my back. Don't think of trying to beat them. I'll use this chance to deal with the big one."

"...I've never swung a sword before."

"It's similar to the axe. Let's go... one, two, three!"

We were on ice, but Eugeo and I didn't slip as we ran at the fastest speed we could muster. We kept praying that this luck would continue till the end, and I roared out from the bottom of my abdomen.

"UWOOOOHHHH!!!"

Eugeo was slower by a bit as he shouted "WAAAAAHHHH!!!' It sounded like a scream, but it did seem to be effective as the 4 goblins widened their yellowish-green eyes. However, they probably weren't stunned by the shouts, but by the fact that the «Ium brats» lunged at them.

I ran 10 paces, kept my body down and aimed for the leftmost goblin and the one beside it. My right shoulder lunged right over. Maybe it was the unexpected action and the correction effect of the difference in size that the two goblins turned twice and skidded off on the ice. I looked aside, and Eugeo's hit succeeded beautifully as the goblins rolled aside like turtle shells rolling.

I continued to charge and accelerated towards the goblin circle. Likely, these guys didn't seem to have much response ability as all of them could only look over blankly without standing up at all, including the leader.

Yes. Just stay around like that and don't move! I prayed as if I was scolding them as I ran past the gaps between the goblins and dashed across the last few meters.

At that moment, the goblin leader, who seemed to have a slightly higher intelligence than the rest, roared angrily,

"DON'T LET THEM GET NEAR THE FIRE—"

But he was a little late. Eugeo and I rushed to the fires and kicked them over to the water. A large amount of ash scattered around as the two large bonfire sank into the black water, leaving behind a *syuuu* sound as they were extinguished with a cloud of white steam.

The dome was immediately in complete darkness for a moment— and then, a faint bluish-white light scattered the darkness. It was the light on the bristlegrass that Eugeo was holding with his left hand.

At that moment, we got our second stroke of luck.

The goblins surrounding us all screamed out, some covering their faces and some turning their backs. I looked over and saw that even the goblin leader on the other side of the lake was bending his upper body back and using his left hand to cover its eyes.

"Kirito... this is...?"

Eugeo whispered in surprise. I simply answered him.

"Most likely...these guys are scared of this light. Now's our chance!"

From the weapons placed messily around the lake, I took out a crude straight sword that looked like a large metal sheet and a curved knife with a slightly wider volume at the front end. I put the knife in Eugeo's hands.

"This knife is used like an axe. Listen, use the bristlegrass' light to hold them off and chase off the guys closing in."

"Ki...Kirito?"

"I'll take that one down."

I simply answered and looked at the goblin leader that was glaring angrily from through the gaps between the fingers covering his face. I held the straight sword with both hands and quickly swung it left and right. Unlike its appearance, it felt a little dull, but it was a lot better than the Blue Rose Sword that was overly heavy.

"GURAAH! YOU IUM BRAT...YOU DARE TO TAKE ON THIS «LIZARD KILLER UGACHI»-SAMA!?"

The leader glared at me with one eye and closed in on me as it roared, drawing the large machete at its waist with its right hand. The pitch black blade had blood that seemed to show signs of rust on it, giving an abnormal pressure.

Can I beat him—!?

Facing this enemy who wasn't tall, but a lot heavier and more muscular than me, I panicked for an instant. However, I immediately gritted my teeth and moved forward. If I didn't beat this guy and save Selka, it would became a situation in which I have brought about the worst fate to her when I came to this world. Size wasn't a problem. In the Former Aincrad, I had had countless battles against enemies 3-4 times larger than me under the condition that I would really die if I lost.

"NO! I'M NOT GOING TO TAKE YOU ON! —I'M GOING TO CONQUER YOU!"

I shouted, partly directed at the leader and partly directed at myself as I immediately dashed through the remaining distance.

My left foot took a large step forward, using the sword to slash down at the left shoulder of enemy diagonally.

I didn't underestimate the enemy, but the goblin leader's reaction was a lot faster than I had imagined. It ignored my attack pattern and swung its machete horizontally. I kept my body down and barely managed to dodge it. I felt that my some of my hair touched it since it felt like they were ripped off. My sword hit home, but only shattered the metallic shoulder armor.

I would have been overwhelmed by force if I stopped. Having such a thought, I kept my center of gravity low and moved beside the enemy, aiming for the opened flank of the abdomen before swinging a horizontal attack. This time was the same as well. Even though I had the feeling, I couldn't break through the simple scale mail, and only managed to send maybe 5-6 sheets of metal flying.

SHARPEN YOUR OWN SWORD PROPERLY! I told off the owner of the sword in my heart, dodging the counterattacking strike that came swinging down from above. The thick blade of the machete pierced through the ice floor on the ground, and I shuddered in fear of the goblin's arm strength.

I definitely couldn't handle this if I simply used single attacks. I made this decision, and while the goblin recovered from its frozen stiff state, I took a huge step forward and launched my counterattack. My body started to move on its own in a semi-automatic manner as it once again moved in a similar way to the countless moved it did in other words, the killer technique called «Sword Skills».

At this moment, a phenomenon I had never imagined before happened.

My sword let out a very weak light that still remained. At the same time, my body flashed through at a speed that far exceeded the physics of this world. It was as if someone was pushing me with an invisible hand from behind.

The first strike that came swinging upwards from the bottom right position grazed past the enemy's left leg and stopped his motion.

The second strike that swung from left to right horizontally sliced the chest plate of the armor and made a light cut on the flesh inside.

The third strike that quickly swung down from the top right side sliced apart the left arm the enemy raised to defend himself from slightly below the elbow.

The fresh blood that came out from the sliced off surface was shown as pitch black under the bluish-white light. The left arm of the goblin that flew off, *kurukuru* fell into the lake on the left side, letting out a heavy splash.

—I won!

As I firmly believed this, I was thoroughly shocked.

That attack just now... the three-continuous-strike sword skill for one-handed swords, «Sharp Nail», wasn't just an appearance, but in fact it really happened. In the midst of slashing, the blade let out red trajectories in the air, and my body was accelerated by an invisible force. In other words, it was «System Assist» with a «Light Effect».

In other words, in this world, Underworld, sword skills really existed. The sword skills were installed into the system of the boosted world. 'Recreation of imagination' couldn't explain this phenomenon. I almost didn't realize that the skill I released was one. The system detected my initial motions and let out the sword skill through assist to correct my actions. If not, such a phenomenon couldn't have happened.

But if that was the case, there was a new question.

Yesterday, I used the single sword skill «Horizontal» with the «Blue Rose Sword» in order to cut down the demonic tree Gigas Cedar. That was an elementary skill that was a lot easier than «Sharp Nail»— just an ordinary swing. However, the system never helped me. The sword didn't glow, and my body didn't accelerate. The blade missed its target, and I fell in an awkward manner.

However, why was I able to use a sword skill at this moment? Was it because this was a real battle? But how did the system decide whether the player was seriously battling...?

As I made this thought, I blinked. In the old SAO, there wasn't much of an opening. I would be still after doing a continuous skill, and the enemy, having been greatly hurt, would be unable to move for the time being.

But— in this world, even with the sword skills, it isn't a VRMMO game. I foolishly forgot about that.

The goblin leader with its left arm sliced off was different from the polygon monsters, as it did not stop for even a moment. Its flashing yellow eyes didn't show any signs of fear nor emptiness, just overwhelming hatred inside. The pitch black blood flowed out from the wound as a scalding roar—

"GAUUAAAA!!!"

And quickly swung the machete in its right hand.

I couldn't dodge the incoming heavy blade that was flying horizontally in time. The area near the tip grazed my left shoulder, and the pressure alone sent me flying by more than 2m as my back landed hard on the icy surface.

At this moment, the goblin leader finally crouched down and put the machete in its mouth and used the right hand to grab onto the sliced off part of the left arm. *Misa misa* - a terrifying sound could be heard. The goblin leader forcefully crushed the flesh to stop the bleeding. Its actions obviously weren't of the standard kind of AI. Yes... I had noticed it the moment that thing declared its name to be «Ugachi». This wasn't a battle between player and monster, but two people wielding weapons trying to kill each other.

"Kirito! Are you hit!?"

Slightly further away, Eugeo used his right hand to hold on to the curved knife while his left hand held onto the glowing grass to hold off the goblin's henchmen.

I wanted to say 'It's just a scratch', but my stiff tongue couldn't move like I thought as I nodded with a trembling voice. As I used one hand to support myself onto the icy surface as I stood up—

A burning feeling came out from the left shoulder, feeling like it was going to burn through all my nerves. *Saka saka* — sparks appeared in my sight. I couldn't help but cry out as my throat let out a groan.

Such— tremendous pain!

It was far more than my pain tolerance could handle. I couldn't do anything other than curl myself and pant lightly. Even so, I still tried to look behind to see the damaged part of my shoulder. The sleeve on the tunic was

completely ripped off, revealing a large and ugly wound on the skin. It was more like a wound ripped by a giant claw than a sword wound. The skin and the flesh under it was completely shaved off as bright-red blood continued to spurt out. My left arm was only left with a numbing hot feeling as my fingertips were unable to move, as though they didn't belong to me.

How could this possibly be the virtual world? I cried out inside my mind.

The point of the so-called virtual world was to eliminate all of reality's pains and difficulties, ugliness and filth, and achieve an environment that was clean and comfortable, right? What was the point of realistically creating such a level of pain and suffering? No— This pain was more than it would be realistically. If I had such an injury in real life, I would probably secrete brain chemicals or end up in a coma as a defensive mechanism, right? It wasn't possible for someone to endure such a level of pain...

—Maybe that was not it.

I tried hard to look away from my wound and mocked myself before changing my thoughts.

I, this person called Kirigaya Kazuto, was completely unused to real pain. In real life, I had never had any severe injuries ever since I grew up. When I was forced by grandfather to learn kendo, I quickly gave up. It was tough when I went through recuperation after SAO, but it was thanks to the most advanced training machines and supplementary medication that I didn't have to worry about pain.

Of course, there was nothing much more to be said about the virtual world. The Nerve Gear and AmuSphere had had a pain absorption function that could remove them almost completely, and the level to which it did so was such that I would wonder if it was too overprotective. Because of this, damage in battles was just a simple increase or decrease in Hit Points. Oh yeah, if such pain existed in Aincrad, I would definitely have been unable to leave the Starting City.

Underworld was a dreamland that was created, and also another reality.

I was uncertain how many days it was before, but I could finally understand the significance of the words I said to Agil in his shop. The so-called reality referred to real pain, hardship and sorrow. Only those who could endure these things that strike them, and overcome them, could get stronger in that world. The goblin leader, no, Ugachi already understood this, and I had never thought of this before.

At the front end of my vision, blurred by tears, Ugachi stopped the bleeding on the sliced off left arm and silently watched me. Its eyes shot out a look of utter vengeance as the surrounding air seemed to rumble. It put the machete it was biting on into its right hand and swung it. *Vun*.

"...Such humiliation, you'll never repay that even if I dice you up and devour you alive...however, let's do this."

Ugachi swirled the machete over its head *Vun, vun* and slowly closed in. I looked away from him, watching Selka, who was lying after being tied up tightly. My mind was thinking that I had to stand up, to stand and fight, but my body just couldn't move. It felt like the negative impression that had developed in me had become a restraint in reality and bound me...

The heavy footsteps suddenly stopped in front of me. The air was rumbling, and I felt that the giant blade was about to be lifted up. It was too late to either dodge or counter. I gritted my teeth and waited for the moment I was to be released from this world.

However, after a long while, the blade of the guillotine never dropped down. *Za zaa-* what replaced it was the sound of the ice surface being trampled on, and then, there was a familiar voice shouting,

"KIRITO—!!"

I widened my eyes in shock as I watched Eugeo leap past me to slash at Ugachi. He continued to swing his right hand wielding the curved knife wildly and forced the enemy to take two, three steps back.

The goblin was startled at first, but he immediately regained his composure and wielded the machete skilfully with only one hand and parried away Eugeo's attacks from left and right. For an instant, I forgot about my pain and yelled,

"STOP IT, EUGEO! HURRY UP AND RUN!!"

However, he continued to yell while losing himself and continued to swing the blade. As expected of someone who'd been swinging that heavy axe for a long time, every single hit's speed was eye-popping, but unfortunately, the motions were too simple. Ugachi first looked like he was enjoying the resistance of a prey as he continued to defend enthusiastically, and then, "GUASS!" It roared and used his toes to kick Eugeo's supporting leg. As Eugeo lost his balance and tripped, it easily raised its machete—

"STOOOPP ITTTTT——!!!"

Before my shout reached them, it casually swung horizontally.

Eugeo took a hit to the abdomen and was sent flying far away, landing right beside me with a blunt sound. I instinctively turned around, and a sharp pain occurred in my left shoulder like a flash, but this time, I ignored the pain and nudged over.

Eugeo's wound was a lot more serious than mine. His upper body was sliced open horizontally, and the jagged wound was bleeding out a lot of fresh blood at a horrifying rate. Under the light of the grass that was still held in his left hand, the irregular workings of the organs inside the wound were laid bare to my eyes.

Cough. With a heavy sound, Eugeo's mouth choked out blood with bubbles mixed in. The green eyes lost their light as they stared right above emptily.

However, Eugeo never stopped trying to stand up. His mouth breathed out air that had some red mist mixed within, trembling as he used both hands to support himself off the ground.

"Eugeo...that's enough...it's..."

I couldn't help but say. The pain on Eugeo's body was not something that could be compared to mine. It was definitely much more than what the normal consciousness could endure.

At that moment— the eyes that had lost their focus looked straight at me, and he blurted out the words that were drenched in blood.

"Whe-When we were young...we promised...me, Kirito...and Alice, from the day we were born together, to the time we die together...this time, I must definitely...protect...I must..."

At this moment Eugeo's arms suddenly lost their strength. I quickly reached out my arms to grab his body. Just when Eugeo's slender yet muscular weight was transferred onto me...

My vision was surrounded by an interrupted white flash, and at the deep part of the screen, there were vague shadows there.

Under the fiery red sunset, I was walking down a path between the wheat fields. The one holding my right hand was the young boy with flax-colored hair, and the one holding onto my left was a blond girl.

That's right...I believed that the world would never change. I believed that the three of us would continue to live together. However, we didn't manage to protect her. We couldn't do anything. How could I forget that despair, that helplessness? This time... This time, I'll definitely...

I could not feel the pain on my shoulder any more. I gently put the unconscious Eugeo onto the icy surface, reached my right hand out and held onto the hilt of the straight sword that dropped onto the floor.

I then looked up and swung horizontally at Ugachi, who was swinging down its machete just at that moment.

"GURAA...!"

The enemy roared out in surprise as its body swayed slightly. I used the momentum as I stood up to ram right into its abdomen. The goblin swayed again and took two, three steps back.

I pointed the sword in my right hand into the center of the enemy, took a deep breath, and exhaled.

It was true that I was a complete novice when it came to the pain of the physical body. However, I have experienced an absolute pain that far surpassed that. This kind of injury was nothing comparing to the pain of losing someone important. The pain of losing was the only thing that would never disappear no matter how anyone tried to manipulate through machines.

Ugachi let out a loud roar of intolerance, and the henchmen around him that were cackling away, *kiki*, all shut up.

"White Ium...don't get cocky!!"

I gathered my consciousness onto the blade tip of the machete as Ugachi charged over ferociously. *Kiiiin*. With this sound, everything else in my sights disappeared as radials. It was an accelerating feeling that I had forgotten for a long time, where my nerves started to feel hot. No— in this world, it should be said that my soul was burning.

As I faced the machete swinging down, I took a step forward to dodge it and slashed from the bottom left side, to cut off the right arm of the enemy

near the shoulder. The machete that was swung together with the giant arm spun, *vuun vuun*, and landed in the midst of the surrounding goblins, causing lots of screams.

Ugachi, who had lost both its arms, was showing anger and more surprise in its yellow eyes as it swayed back. The black liquid that continued to seep out from its wound landed on the ice and created steam.

"...How did this great me lose to an Ium...a mere Ium brat..."

Without waiting for the panting voice to finish, I charged forward with all I got.

"No. My name's not «Ium»!"

I subconsciously said this. At the same time, the toes on the left foot, the fingertips on the right hand, and the sword tip that reached the fingertips became as sharp as a whip. The blade shone again, and this time it was a pale green light. An invisible hand pushed me hard from behind as I used the one-handed thrust sword skill, «Sonic Leap».

"I AM...THE SWORDSMAN KIRITO!!"

Pyun. As the sound of the ripping air reached my ears, Ugachi's giant head was already flying high into the air.

That head seemed to fly up straight before turning and falling. I reached my left hand out to grab it, holding it by the decorative feather that was standing like a plume, raised the head of the leader that was still bleeding and yelled.

"I TOOK YOUR LEADER'S HEAD! ANYONE WHO WANTS TO FIGHT, STEP RIGHT UP! THOSE WHO DON'T WANT TO FIGHT, SCRAM BACK INTO THE LAND OF DARKNESS!"

Eugeo, try and hang on for a while. I muttered deep inside my heart as I glared at the surrounding group with my utmost killing intent with both eyes. The goblins started to panic as they saw their leader die, each of them looking at each other and letting out panicked sounds *gii gii*

After a while, one of them, who was standing at the front row, holding a stick behind its shoulder, walked out.

"Gehe, in that case, once I kill you, I, Abuli-sama will become the next head..."

Right now, I didn't have the time to patiently hear it finish its words. My left hand gripped the head as I dashed forward, using the same skill as before to slice that guy from the right rib to the left shoulder. With a blunt sound, blood splattered next, and the upper body slid down the sliced off area before landing on the ground.

With that, the remaining goblins seemed to have finally made their decision. They all screamed out and rushed towards a corner of the dome. Several goblins pushed each other and moved through the exit we didn't enter from, and soon disappeared without a trace. The echoes of footsteps and screams gradually faded away and vanished. The ice-built dome entered an icy cold moment of silence, as if the commotion just now was a lie.

I took a deep breath, endured the pain that came out from my left shoulder again, and threw away the sword in my right hand as well as the head in my left. I turned around and ran towards my friend who had collapsed.

"EUGEO!! HANG IN THERE!!"

I shouted, but his pale face wasn't moving at all. I could feel some slight breathing from the slightly parted lips, but it seemed that it could stop at any time. The devastating wound on his abdomen was still bleeding. I knew that I had to stop it, but I didn't know how.

I used my stiff right hand to quickly draw a mark and knocked on Eugeo's shoulder, looking at the window that appeared with a praying attitude.

The life— Durability Points, were indicated as [244/3425]. Also, the value in the front was dropping at a horrifying rate of one point every two seconds. In other words, Eugeo's Life would be at its end in about 480 seconds— there were approximately 8 minutes left.

"...Hang on. I'll immediately save you! DON'T DIE!"

I yelled again and immediately got up, dashing towards the wheelbarrow that was left aside.

On the cart, there was Selka, all tied up amidst the wooden barrels and containers with unknown contents and many weapons. I pulled out a knife from a nearby box and quickly cut the rope.

I carried her petite body, laid her down on the wide floor and quickly checked her, but there was no obvious external wounds. Her breathing

was a lot steadier than Eugeo's. I grabbed the shoulders on her nun habit and shook her with the minimum amount of force.

"SELKA...SELKA! WAKE UP!!"

Selka's long eyebrows immediately twitched, and the light brown eyes opened with a blink. It seemed that she couldn't recognize me with just the light of the bristlegrass tossed beside Eugeo as her throat let out a small cry.

"No...noo..."

Selka waved her arms and tried to push me aside, and I held her down before shouting,

"SELKA, IT'S ME! KIRITO! DON'T WORRY, THE GOBLINS WERE CHASED AWAY!"

On hearing my voice, Selka immediately stopped. She reached her fingers out tentatively and gently touched my face.

"Kirito...is it really you, Kirito...?"

"Ahh, I came to save you. Are you alright? Are you hurt anywhere?"

"No... Not at all. I'm fine..."

Selka's lips curled aside, and then she immediately leaped over to hug me on the neck.

"Kirito...I...I...!"

The slight breathing sound could be heard beside my ear, letting out a child-like cry— but before that could happen, I carried Selka with both hands, turned around and started running.

"Sorry, cry later! Eugeo's severely hurt!!"

"Eh..."

The arched body immediately froze. I kicked aside the shattered ice on the ground and the junk those goblins left behind as I dashed towards Eugeo and put Selka down.

"It's too late for ordinary treatment... use your sacred arts to save him, Selka, please!"

Selka listened to me as she held her breath and knelt down before gingerly reaching her right hand out. She touched the deep wound on Eugeo, and suddenly moved her hand back.

After a while, Selka shook her head that was tied into three braids hard.

"...I can't...this kind...this kind of wound, my sacred arts... can't..."

As she used her fingers to touch Eugeo, her face went pale.

"Eugeo... you're lying, right... because of me... Eugeo..."

Tears trickled down Selka's face, landing onto the pool of blood on the ice. She took her hands back and covered her face, letting out a cry. I felt that it was cruel to say this to such a girl, but I yelled.

"CRY AFTER YOU HAVE HEALED EUGEO! NO MATTER WHETHER THERE'S A WAY, JUST TRY IT! AREN'T YOU SUPPOSED TO BE THE NEXT SISTER!? YOU'RE THE SUCCESSOR TO ALICE, RIGHT!?"

Selka's shoulders jerked hard for a moment, but immediately slumped back weakly.

"...I...couldn't be like nee-sama... I couldn't even memorize the spells nee-sama spent three days to master even after a month. Right now, what I could only heal are... very small wounds... "

"Eugeo, he..."

I was driven by the emotions rising up within me as I said desperately,

"Eugeo came to save you, Selka! He risked his life not for Alice, but for you!"

Selka's shoulders jerked again, this time, more than before.

During this time, Eugeo's life was dropping towards zero. There were only 2 minutes left, maybe even one. An instant moment of silence felt so long it was unbearable.

Suddenly, Selka lifted her face. The expressions of fear and hesitation she had from several seconds before was all gone.

"—It's too late for ordinary treatment. We can only try a dangerous high-ranked sacred art. Kirito, I need your help."

"I-I understand. I'll do whatever you say."

"Give me your left hand."

I immediately reached my left hand out, and Selka used her right hand to hold it tightly. Then, she used the left to hold onto Eugeo's right hand, which was lying on the icy surface, tightly.

"If the art fails, both you and I may die. Be prepared."

"Just let me be the one to die then— ready whenever you are!"

Selka stared straight at me with sturdy eyes, nodded and closed her eyes before taking a deep breath.

"システム(System)・コール！(call!)"

The loud voice echoed through the ice dome.

"—トランスファー(Transfer)・ヒューマンユニット(human unit)・デュラビリティ(durability)、ライト(right)・トゥ(to)・レフト！！(left!!)"

Her voice echoed. *Kiin*- the sharp voice became louder— and then, a blue light pillar appeared, with Selka in the middle.

It was a lot brighter than the grass, incandescent, as it illuminated all the corners of the large dome a light blue color. I couldn't help but narrow my eyes, but this was only for a moment as my left hand that was held by Selka suddenly had a strange feeling surrounding it, which caused me to open my eyes wide.

It felt like my entire body disappeared into the light as it flowed out from my left hand.

Looking closely, my body was actually creating lots of small spheres of light, moving from my left hand to Selka's right hand. I looked over at where the spheres of light were moving towards, and the light flowed through Selka's body, increasing in brightness before being absorbed into Eugeo's right hand.

Transfer Durability. In other words, it was a sacred art that transferred one person's Life over to another. If I opened my window now, I would be able to find that my value was dropping.

It's fine. Just take it all. I thought silently in my heart as I exerted more force into my left hand. Selka, who was acting as the conduit of the energy

and the amplifier, looked as if she was in pain too. I realized the cruelty of this world again, and how great the price of living was.

Pain, suffering, and sorrow. The reason why there was such a deliberate intent to emphasize these things that weren't required in the virtual world was obviously something closely related to the existence of Underworld. If the technicians of RATH were trying to gain some form of breakthrough by torturing the Fluctlights of the residents, it seemed that the unexpected intruder, me, was being a form of interference by helping Eugeo here.

But as for me, just send me to the devil for that. Even if he was a soul, Eugeo was still my friend and I would never let him die like this.

As the life transfer continued, my body was surrounded by a strong chill. I used my gradually fading sight to observe Eugeo. The wound looked a lot smaller than when the spell started, but it wasn't completely healed at all, as the blood flowing out didn't stop in the slightest.

"Ki-Kirito... are-are you still alright...?"

Selka panted in pain as she said in an interrupted manner.

"No worries... a little more, give Eugeo a little more!"

I immediately answered, but in fact, my eyes had almost lost all their sight while my right arm and leg were going numb. The left hand Selka was holding onto was the only thing throbbing warmly.

Even if I lost my life in this world, it was completely fine. If I could get Eugeo's life back, I could endure the pain that was a lot more than before. However, the only regret would be that I would never see this world progress until the end. If those goblins were just the start, if the invasion of the land of darkness continued to intensify, I would have to worry about Rulid village that would be the first to be exposed to it. I would lose all my memories when I log out, so I might not be able to log in again.

No, even if I disappear—

Eugeo, who witnessed the goblins and took the sword to fight would definitely do something. He would warn the village chief, strengthen the guards, and warn the neighboring towns and cities. He would definitely do that.

And so, I couldn't let Eugeo die here.

Ahh, but— my life was about to end. For some reason, I knew this. Eugeo still hadn't opened his eyes. Even after spending all my life, it wasn't enough to heal his wound and drag him back from the edge of death?

"...I...can't...if I continue, Kirito, your Life will...!"

Selka's crying seemed to come from afar.

Don't stop, continue. Even though I wanted to say this, my mouth couldn't move, and trying to even sustain my own thoughts became gradually more difficult.

Is this death? The simulated death of the soul in Underworld... or, will the death of the soul kill the physical body in the real world? What caused me to think about this was the cold I couldn't endure and the terrifying loneliness...

Suddenly, I felt someone's hands on my shoulders.

They were warm. It felt like my body that was frozen in ice was gradually melting.

I— know these hands. Hands that were delicate like the feathers of a bird, yet grabbing onto the future more forcefully than anyone.

.....Who, are you.....?

I asked without letting out my voice, and my left ear felt a soft breathing. After that, I heard a voice that was so nostalgic that it made me want to cry.

『Kirito, Eugeo... I've been waiting for both of you. I'll continue to wait... at the top of the Central Cathedral...』

Her blond hair let out a light like the stars and filled me within. The overwhelming energy pulsed through all the corners of my body, and seeped out from my left hand as if it was looking for an exit.

Part 5

The percussive clear sound echoed in the high spring skies.

Eugeo finished swinging the axe 50 times, wiped away the sweat on his forehead and turned around. I put down the canteen with the Siral water and asked.

"How is your wound? Does it hurt anymore?"

"Un, I managed to recover fully with a day's rest. But there's still a little scar. Also... I don't know if it's my imagination, but it seems that this Dragon Bone Axe became extremely light."

"Doesn't seem like it. 42 out of 50 strikes hit the core."

On hearing that, Eugeo immediately raised his eyebrows, and then smiled.

"Really? Then I'll win the bet today."

"Not likely."

I smiled back, then took the Dragon Bone Axe and used my right hand to swing it lightly. It really felt like the feeling was a lot steadier than I could remember in my memories.

2 nights had passed since the horrific nightmare-like experience in the cave of the mountain range at the edge.

Eugeo managed to keep his life with the help of Selka's sacred art. The sun had already set when I carried Eugeo on my right side and the head of the goblin leader on my left as we returned to Rulid village. Everyone was gathered at the plaza, discussing about whether they would start a search party. As soon as they caught sights of us, they all heaved a sigh of relief, just before village chief Gasupht and Sister Azariya immediately started blasting us with harsh scoldings. Maybe the adults were more freaked out that a supposedly-impossible thing like 3 young folks breaking the «Village Rules» had happened.

However, when I shoved the head of the leader in my left hand right in front of the adults, everyone's reactions changed. Ugachi's yellowish-green eyes that were twice the size of humans, with his ragged sharp teeth and savage face, stared straight at them, and after a moment of silence, the adults let out screams and consternation several times louder than before.

After that, Eugeo and Selka were the ones who mainly explained about the goblin gang camping in the north cave and how they may have been a scouting squad from the land of darkness. The village chief and everyone else looked as if they really wanted to treat this as some sort of childish and outlandish nonsense, but they couldn't laugh when they saw the head of the monster sitting on the stone steps. The discussion immediately changed to defending the village, and we were safely released before dragging our tired feet back home.

I let Selka treat the wound on my left shoulder in the church room, and then collapsed like a pile of mud onto the bed, starting to sleep. The following day, Eugeo and I were allowed off work and enjoyed the luxury and laziness to continue sleeping. Another night passed, and this morning arrived. The shoulder pain and the fatigue in my body had completely disappeared.

After having breakfast, I walked with Eugeo to the forest with the same energetic expression. He finished the first 50 swings— and now.

I looked at the axe in my right hand and said to Eugeo, who was sitting slightly further away.

"I say, Eugeo, do you remember...? In that cave, when you were slashed by the goblin...you said something strange, right? It's like you, Eugeo and Alice and I were friends a long time ago..."

Eugeo didn't answer immediately. He kept quiet for a while as a light breeze blew by, blowing loudly with the trees. A soft voice came with the tail of the wind and entered my ears.

"...I remembered. It should be impossible... but for some reason, I remembered it clearly. I, Kirito, and Alice were born together in this village and grew up together... Alice was standing there the day she was taken."

"...I see."

I nodded and sank deep in thought.

Maybe his memory was all jumbled up in such an extreme situation. I could possibly explain this using that. Since the thing that formed Eugeo's consciousness and personality was the «Fluctlight» just like mine, it wouldn't be inexplicable for him to have some mistakes in his memories at the brink of death.

However, the problem was— in that situation, I had the same memory confusion. I watched Eugeo, who was gradually dying there, and really felt a fresh memory that I actually grew up with him in Rulid village. Also, I even recalled the blond long-haired girl, Alice, whom I've never met before.

This was impossible. This me, Kirigaya Kazuto, has a detailed memory of living with my sister Suguha in Kawagoe, Saitama Prefecture until today (or more accurately, until I woke up in this world). I didn't feel, nor did I want to think, that they were all fabricated.

Was this phenomenon just an illusion Eugeo and I saw at the same time?

If that was the case, there was only one thing I couldn't explain. When Selka used the sacred arts to transfer my life over to Eugeo and tried to resuscitate him, I did feel the presence of a 4th person in my gradually fading consciousness. That person even said: Kirito, Eugeo, I'll be waiting for you at the top of the Central Cathedral.

I couldn't view that voice as a hallucination created in the midst of my fading consciousness as well. That's because I have never heard of the term «Central Cathedral» until this moment. Of course, there naturally wasn't one in the real world, and even though I have gone through all sorts of virtual worlds, I had never even heard of that place or building before, let alone been there.

In other words, that voice didn't belong to either me or Eugeo, and was even less likely to be Selka; someone actually spoke to me. Would it... be too much of a stretch to deduce that she was the girl Alice who was abducted from the village 6 years ago? If it was really her, did my improbable past in Rulid village together with Eugeo and Alice really exist...?

I interrupted that thought for the umpteenth time ever since I woke up, and said,

"Eugeo. In that cave, when Selka used that sacred art on you, did you hear anyone else's voice?"

Eugeo immediately answered this time.

"Nope. I completely lost consciousness at that time. Did you hear something, Kirito?"

"No... just my imagination. Forget about it... then, let's get to work. My goal is to get in more than 45 times."

I hurriedly chased aside the thoughts in my mind, turned towards the Gigas Cedar again, holding the axe tightly with both hands while concentrating on all parts of my body.

The axe I swung out had followed the trajectory I imagined and traced, looking like it was attracted to it as it hit the half moon-shaped core of the trunk.

***

Today, we ended up finishing the combined 1,000 axe swings 30 minutes earlier than before. That was because both of us weren't that tired and didn't need much rest at all. The number of critical hits increased from the previous week, and maybe it was just my imagination, but it was like our naked eyes could see how much we progressed through the markings on the giant tree.

Eugeo stretched out lazily in a satisfied manner, saying that we should have lunch even though it was early. He sat down on the usual tree root, and I sat down beside him. Eugeo took out two round buns from the cloth beside him and handed them to me.

I took one with one hand and said with a wry smile as I looked at the bread that was still as hard as stone.

"It would be great if this bread could become softer like how the axe feels lighter."

"Ahaha."

Eugeo laughed heartily, taking a large bite and shrugged his shoulders.

"...Unfortunately, it's still the same. Speaking of which...why does it feel like the axe got lighter...?"

"Who knows?"

I said, but I had already predicted this phenomenon the moment I opened my own «window» in the previous night. That problematic Object Control Authority, System Control Authority and my maximum Life had greatly increased.

I could imagine the reason as well. We managed to force the large goblin group in the cave to retreat— in other words, we finished a high difficulty mission, and created a «Level up» phenomenon that was commonly used in normal VRMMOs. I didn't want to experience it again, but taking on a tough battle did bring its rewards.

This morning, I pretended not to know anything as I asked Selka whether she was the same as well. The sacred arts that had a high rate of failure last week seemed like they could be used properly as well. Selka, who never actually took part in the battle, also gained a level up effect. Most likely, all three of us were treated as party members, and everyone gained experience. The way I look at it, this should be an acceptable reason.

Eugeo's Object Control Authority should have increased to around 48 like me. In that case, there was no reason not to try that again.

I finished the 2 round buns in a few bites and stood up. Eugeo was still eating slowly as he looked over. I walked towards the large opening in the Gigas Cedar's trunk and reached out for the Blue Rose Sword bundle that was placed there a few days ago.

I held onto the leather cover while half-believing and half-praying, and used all the strength in my body to lift it up.

"Ohh..."

Immediately, I nearly fell and hurriedly took two steps back. The weight that I remembered feeling like a barbell with maximum weight added, had actually dropped to such an extent that it felt like the weight was closer to a thick metal bar.

The sword continued to press down on my wrist heavily. However, this weight was more of a delightful one, and the feeling reminded me of my beloved swords at the end of the former Aincrad.

I used my left hand to hold onto the leather cover, unfastened the string from it, and used the right hand to hold the sword hilt adorned with beautiful decorations. Eugeo was biting into his bun as he widened his eyes, and I smiled back at him. *Sharin!!* I drew the sword with a spine-chilling unsheathing sound.

Unlike a few days ago, the Blue Rose Sword wasn't the least bit unwieldy as it lay silently in my hand, like a shy and beautiful princess. The more I looked at it, the more beautiful the sword seemed. Whether it was the

white leather handle with textures that felt like it was drawing the hand in, the blade's transparency that seemed to hold a complex light, or the intricacy of the Rose and its vine-like patterns, they were all parts that couldn't be recreated by the weapons made from polygons that I was familiar with. It was no wonder that Bercouli in the story wanted to steal it from the dragon.

"Oi... oi, Kirito, you can hold that sword?"

Eugeo looked shocked. *Hyun hyun* I swung the sword around twice to demonstrate to him.

"The buns didn't get softer, but this sword seems to have become lighter. Well, take a look."

I faced the Gigas Cedar again and bent my waist down. My right foot took a step back as I faced the target sideways, using this turning motion to level the sword in my right hand. As I charged up for a moment, the blade was covered with a soft blue light.

"—SEII!!"

I shouted out simply and stamped hard into the ground. The System Assist recognized the matching sword skill impression and caused me to accelerate, giving a slashing hit with tremendous speed and accuracy. It was the one-handed sword skill «Horizontal».

The Blue Rose Sword seemed to flash by like horizontal lightning as it accurately hit with pinpoint precision, causing a tremendous impact sound. The large trunk of the Gigas Cedar trembled slightly, and the birds that were perching around its branches all flew away.

I became engrossed with this accomplishment of «Man being one with the sword» that I hadn't experienced for a long time, and looked over at my right arm extending forward. The light blue and clear silver blade were half embedded into the wooden grain that was glossy with a metallic black light.

This time, Eugeo's eyes and even his mouth widened as he dropped the half-eaten bun onto the moss. However, the boy who was made a woodcutter for his Sacred Task didn't seem to notice, as he spoke with a trembling voice,

".....Kirito....., was that... a «sword skill» just now?"

I guessed so. From what I heard, it seemed that there was a concept of sword skills existing in this world. I just didn't know whether that referred to the sword skills governed by the system or not. I placed the sword into the scabbard in my left hand and cautiously answered.

"Ahh... I guess so, yeah."

"In that case... your Sacred Task before being taken away by the god of darkness might be a yeoman ...no, maybe you were a sentry guard in a large city. Only the soldier forces would teach real sword skills."

Eugeo started rattling away, a rare sight at that as his green eyes were glittering. Upon seeing this, I immediately understood. He was tasked with woodcutting as his career job, and for six years, had continued to swing that axe without complaining— but he undoubtedly had the soul of a swordsman. The admiration for this thing called a sword and the desire to master the sword skills were imprinted deep within him.

Eugeo took a step forward, and another before arriving in front of me, looking straight into my eyes and asking with a trembling voice,

"Kirito... your sword skills, what sect does it belong to? Do you remember, the name of the sect...?"

I thought for an instant, and then shook my head,

"No, I remember. My sword skill is the «Aincrad's Style»."

Of course, this was a name I made up on the spot, but once I have said it out, I felt that no other name could work. That was because all my skills were learnt and honed from that floating city.

"Ain—crad, style."

Eugeo repeated that again as he nodded.

"Such an intriguing name. I have never heard of it before, but this may be the name of your teacher or the city you used to live in... —Kirito, well... I..."

Eugeo suddenly looked down and stammered. But several seconds later, he lifted his head again as the light of determination returned to his eyes.

"—Can you teach me your «Aincrad-style Sword Skills»? I'm not a soldier, or even a guard of the village... so it may be against some sort of rule..."

"Does the Taboo Index or the Imperial... law have some clauses like «those who aren't soldiers can't learn sword skills»?"

I asked calmly. Eugeo bit his lip lightly, and after a while, whispered.

"...There's no such clause... but it's forbidden to have «Many Sacred Tasks». Normally, those who were tasked to the Sacred Task of guards or soldiers could learn sword skills. So, if I start learning sword skills... I might be viewed as giving up on my own Sacred Duty..."

Eugeo's shoulders sank slowly. However, he gripped his fists hard as his tense muscles trembled slightly.

I seemed to be able to see the binds around his heart. The people living in this «Underworld» —the «Artificial Fluctlights» that RATH used some sort of means to mass produce— had a unique point that people like us in the real world didn't have.

Most likely, they "would never go against the high-ranked rules that were ingrained into their consciousness. The highest ranked Axiom Church's «Taboo Index» and the Norlangarth Empire's «Fundamental Law» aside, they wouldn't even go against the «village rules» that this Rulid village inherited on their own. They couldn't do it.

Thus, Eugeo could only suppress his urge to look for his childhood friend, Alice, who was taken to the capital. He restrained his heart and continued to swing the axe, facing the giant tree he could definitely never take down in his lifetime.

But right this moment, he wanted to change his own fate through his own will. Of course, he said that he wanted me to teach him sword skills because he had an admiration for them, but more importantly, it was the greatest hope buried deep within his heart all this while... to save the captured Alice that he wanted to gain the strength to fight. Wasn't this line revealing his own desire?

Eugeo lowered his head as he trembled. I watched him silently and kept telling him inside my heart.

—Do your best, Eugeo. Don't give up. Don't lose to the things restraining you. Step forward... take the first step forward. Because you're a swordsman.

At this moment—

The flax-colored haired boy seemed to hear my words as he lifted his face up. The beautiful green eyes had an intensity I had never seen before as they pierced through my eyes. An interrupted trembling voice continued to come out from between the teeth that grit together,

".....But, but, I... want, to be stronger. I won't allow, the same mistake, to happen again. Need to take back... what I lost. Kirito... teach me, the sword skills."

I was really touched inside deep inside my heart, but still continued to suppress these emotions as I smiled and nodded.

"Understood. I'll teach you the skills I know — but the training will be tough."

I changed my expression to a mischievous one as I reached my right hand out, and Eugeo's lips finally relaxed somewhat as he held onto my hand tightly.

"Fine by me. Ahh, really, this is something... I, I, just kept looking forward to."

Eugeo again lowered his head as two, three beads of water slid down his face. There was sunlight shining through the gaps between the leaves. Eugeo stepped forward before I could even be shocked, and buried his face into my right shoulder, letting out a very weak moan that spread through the bodies leaned together.

"Now... I know. I've been waiting for you, Kirito. For six years, in this forest, I've been waiting for you to arrive..."

"—Ahh."

I answered with a random voice and used the right hand wielding the Blue Rose Sword to pat Eugeo's back lightly.

"...I must have woken up here in this forest to meet you too, Eugeo."

I strongly felt that these words I subconsciously said was the real truth.

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The Demonic Cedar Tree, the tyrant of the forest, the steel-like Gigas Cedar was finally— or should I say easily, chopped down. It was just 5

days after Eugeo and I used the Blue Rose Sword to practice the «Aincrad-styled Sword Skills».

The reason was simple. That giant tree was a perfect training platform. Every time I demonstrated «Horizontal», Eugeo would practice it over and over again, and the cut on the trunk continued to deepen. Once the cut occupied about 80% of the diameter, it happened.

"—SEIAA!!"

The giant tree took the horizontal slash from Eugeo's refined motion and let out an ominous creaking sound that had never happened before.

Both of us stared at each other in a dumbstruck manner, and then at the trunk of the Gigas Cedar that extended all the way into sky, and we froze in shock as we saw the giant tree fall slowly towards us.

However, at this moment, it didn't feel like a large tree was falling towards us, but that the land we were standing on was falling forward. The tree with a diameter of more than 4m succumbed to gravity as it lowered its head towards us, and the scene was so surreal.

Just 80cm —if I described the distance using the unit in this world, it would be «80 cen»— the surrounding roots couldn't endure the tree's own heavy weight and burst into coal-like remains. The giant tree's final cry was a lot more intense than even 10 bolts of thunder from heaven as it was said that the sound of destruction even reached pass the central plaza of the village, all the way to the northernmost guard sentry post.

Eugeo and I cried out at the same time as we split up left and right respectively. The pitch black Gigas Cedar sliced apart the sky that was gradually becoming orange and slowly, slowly fell down. Its large body finally collapsed and laid down on the ground. We took the impact that was ridiculously large and were sent flying into the air. Once we have fallen back and landed on our butts, our lives have dropped by about 50 points.

***

"That really surprised me... there are so many people in this village."

I received a large mug filled with apple cider from Eugeo as I muttered.

At the moment, there were a few clusters of bonfires at the central plaza of Rulid village, lighting up the faces of the villagers gathered there. The band beside the fountain was playing with instruments that looked like bagpipes

and very long flutes. Also, there were performers in animal skin dancing with the music in a waltz. The villagers were all clapping and tapping their feet in rhythm as they danced under the night.

I sat beside a table slightly further away, and my feet tapped along with the rhythm. Suddenly, I really felt an urge to jump and dance with the villagers in the circle, which was really unbelievable.

"I think this is the first time I see so many villagers gathered together. There's even more people than the prayer festival at the Saint's Day at the end of the year, definitely."

Eugeo said as he smiled, and I reached out the mug in my right hand. I had no idea how many times we toasted. The foaming beer that was about the same as the apple cider, but when I drank up, my face would still feel hot.

Once they knew that the Gigas Cedar was cut down, the village chief had organized a village council meeting with the more well known villagers. During that time, it seemed that they had a heated debate over what to do with the «Giant tree Cutter» Eugeo— and me.

What was scary was that some people even thought that it was a lot earlier than expected. Basically, it was earlier by about 900 years, and finishing the mission was a mistake and we had to be punished. However, the village chief Gasupht finalized things and decided that no matter what, the entire village had to organize a party to celebrate and deal with Eugeo according to the law.

As for what the law was about, I had no idea as well, and I asked him. He merely smiled and told me that I would know shortly.

However, after looking at his expression, I knew that at least he wouldn't be told off. I finished up the beer inside my mug, grabbed a stick of roasted meat with meat sauce dripping from the plate beside me, and took a huge bite.

Thinking about it carefully, after I came to this world, everything I ate tasted bland, like the round buns and the dishes in the church that were mostly vegetables, so this would be the first time I was eating something with the word meat in it. Besides the tender beef that was coated with thick sauce — there was also the fragrance of something that smelled like meat, which made it really hard to believe that this was the virtual world. Just this smell alone was worth the tough battle against the Gigas Cedar.

However, things would definitely not end just like that. I felt that it should be that we were finally staring at the starting line. I moved my line of sight and looked at Eugeo with the Blue Rose Sword hanging proudly there.

During the past 5 days, he had had sufficient practice with the initial basic one handed sword skill — the one-strike horizontal slash «Horizontal» on the Gigas Cedar.

Just like the randomly named Aincrad-style indicated, this was a sword skill that existed in the old VRMMO game «Sword Art Online».

I could still understand somewhat why this action could be replicated. When I went to the VR game that was based around gunfights, the world of «Gun Gale Online», I used a few sword skills to break through tough battles, but in the end, that was just letting the avatar trace the actions, and there was no light effect or system assist that caused the sword to accelerate with the skill. It's to be expected that these weren't written into the game system.

However, in this other world Underworld, the sword skills all took effect completely. If I did the play motion and imagined the actions of the skill, the sword would glow and accelerate. I was worried that I may be the only one who could do it on the first day of training, but on the second day, Eugeo managed to launch a «Horizontal» successfully for the first time, proving that any of the residents could use sword skills as long as the conditions were met.

The question now would be why such a phenomenon happened. There shouldn't be any relationship between the RATH-developed STL's technical group and the now –defunct Argus that developed SAO. If there was, it would be... that man who introduced me to the strange group called RATH and was once part of the country's task force in the SAO incident...

"Don't tell me..."

I muttered as I started eating the second skewered meat. If the thought I had was true, that guy couldn't just be someone doing the introductions, but someone immediately related to the core of this incident — but I had no way to check this out. If I wanted to get more information, I had to first leave Rulid village and head to the capital way down south.

The largest obstacle to this plan, the Gigas Cedar was chopped down. Then, there was only one thing left to do.

After finishing the meat and vegetables on the metal skewer, I turned to the table and looked at my partner, who was staring at the ring of villagers, before saying,

"I say, Eugeo..."

"Un...what is it?"

"From now on, you..."

But before I could continue, a shrill voice came from above our heads.

"Ah, there you are! What are you guys doing, the main characters for this celebration?"

I spent quite some time to realize that this girl, who was standing in front of us with her arms folded and her back straightened, was Selka. She had already undone the 3 braids on her head and had a headband on. She wasn't wearing a black nun habit, but a red vest and a grass-colored skirt.

"Ah, no...I'm not good at dancing..."

Eugeo continued to eat as he tried to look for excuses, and I shook my right hand.

"Yeah, me too. I lost my memory..."

"It's just dancing! You'll learn once you dance around!"

She grabbed Eugeo and my hands at the same time and dragged us up from the chair. Selka dragged us to the center of the plaza despite our protests and pushed us out. The crowd immediately cheered, and we were swallowed by the dancing ring.

Luckily, their dance was rather simple, about the same kind taught during the sports festival. After changing through 3 dance partners, I finally managed to imitate them and started dancing. Slowly, with the simple melody, my movements became a lot more joyous, and my feet got lighter.

The girls who didn't look like either Easterners or Westerners had a healthy blush on their faces as they happily laughed. I held their hands as I danced with them, and had a feeling, wondering whether I really was a wanderer without memories. It's really peculiar.

—Speaking of which, I once danced in the virtual world as well. My dance partner was my sister Suguha's other identity in Alfheim, the Slyph

swordswoman Lyfa. Her smile overlapped with the face of the girl in front of me now, causing my nose to hurt a little.

As I was engrossed in the unexpected homesick feeling, the music got more intense and faster before stopping suddenly. I looked over at the band, and found that a burly man with a nice beard stepped on the podium with all sorts of instruments around it. He was the village chief of Rulid village, Selka's father, Gasupht.

The village chief clapped twice and called out in a baritone.

"Everyone, the celebration has arrived at its climax, but listen to what I have to say for a while."

The villagers raised their mugs of ale and cider that were meant to cool off their heated bodies after dancing and cheered to toast back at the village chief. Everyone then went quiet and the village chief looked around before saying again,

"—The greatest wish of our forefathers in Rulid village is finally fulfilled! The demonic tree that took Terraria and Solus from the lush southern land has been cut down! We will have a new place to grow wheat, beans and rear livestock!"

Gasupht's brilliant voice was again covered. The village chief raised his hands to wait for everyone to quieten down before he continued,

"The young man who accomplished this feat— Orick's son, Eugeo, come here!"

The village chief waved to a corner of the plaza, and over there, Eugeo looked tense as he stood up. The slight short and shout man beside him should be his father, Orick-san. He did not resemble Eugeo at all other than the hair color, and there was no pride on his face so he looked somewhat flustered.

Eugeo wasn't prompted by his father, but by the surrounding villagers. He walked up to the podium and stood beside the village chief, and as he faced the plaza, everyone let out the 3rd and loudest cheer. I clapped loudly with an enthusiasm not losing to them as well.

"As according to the rules—"

The village chief's voice rang again, and the villagers all kept quiet and pricked their ears.

"Eugeo, who had completed his task fully, shall have the right to choose his next Sacred Task. He can continue to cut wood in the forest, follow his father to farm, herd the cattle, brew wine or be a merchant, he can choose whatever path he wants!"

—What!?

I felt my urge to dance quickly cooling off.

It was not the time to hold girls' hands and flutter around. I should have given Eugeo the final push earlier on. It would be wasted if he said something like I want to grow wheat or something.

I held my breath as I watched Eugeo on the podium. He lowered his head in a bothered manner, grabbing his hair with his right hand and gripping and loosening his left. I might as well rush to the podium, grab his shoulder and yell that we're going to the capital — as I thought about that, a small voice rang beside me.

"Eugeo...intends to leave the village, I guess..."

It was Selka, who had stood beside me without me knowing. Her mouth curled into a smile showing a mix of loneliness and delight.

"Is, is that so?"

"Un, that's right. What else is there to hesitate about?"

Eugeo seemed to have heard her voice as he used his left hand to grab tightly onto the Blue Rose Sword at his waist. He lifted his head to look first at the village chief, and then around at the villagers before saying in a loud and clear voice.

"I want— to become a swordsman. I want to join the guards of Zakkaria town and refine my skills. One day, I'll head to the capital."

After a moment of silence, there was a commotion amongst the villagers, but this time it didn't look friendly. The adults were all frowning, gathered together and were seemingly talking about something. His father and the two young men beside him —most likely Eugeo's elder brothers— didn't look too happy either.

This time, village chief Gasupht was the one who controlled the crowd, raising a hand to make the villagers quieten down and giving the same stern looking as he spoke.

"Eugeo, are you—"

On saying upto this point, he stroked his beard, and continued.

"...No, I won't ask you for the reason. The Church has decreed that you have the right to choose your next Sacred Task. Alright, as an elder of Zakkaria, I recognize Orick's son Eugeo's new Sacred Task to be a swordsman. If you're willing, you can leave the village to practice your sword skills."

Hoo...hh. I sighed for a long while.

In that case, I can finally see the core of this world with my own eyes. If Eugeo became a farmer, I would have definitely intended to head to the capital alone, but since I had no knowledge or money for travelling, I might end up having to spend countless months or even years if I were to walk aimlessly. On thinking about how these few days of hard work had finally paid off, my shoulders immediately relaxed a lot.

The villagers seemed to have accepted the chief's decision as, though they hesitated somewhat at first, they started clapping. But before their claps got louder, a sharp roar broke the night sky.

"WAIT A SEC!"

A large young man split the wall of people and leapt to the front of the podium.

I had a good impression on the wilted-leaf colored short hair and stern look with the simple-looking longsword hanging on the waist. This person was the guard of this village stationed at the sentry in the south.

The young man seemed to be facing off against Eugeo on the podium as he roared crudely,

"IT SHOULD BE MY RIGHT TO AIM FOR THE GOAL OF BEING A GUARD OF ZAKKARIA! LOGICALLY, EUGEO CAN ONLY LEAVE THE VILLAGE AFTER ME, RIGHT!?'

"YEAH, THAT'S RIGHT!"

The one who walked out as he yelled was a middle-aged man who had similar hair color and facial build, but had a bulging tummy.

"...Who's that?"

I brought my face over to Selka to ask. Selka pondered for a while and answered."

"It's the ex guard-captain Doyke-san and his son, the current guard captain. They're the most skilled family in the village, but also the most annoying family here."

"I see..."

Just when I was about to consider what to do next, chief Gasupht listened to Jink and his father's opinion before raising his hand as he looked like he was trying to counsel them.

"But Jink, you've only been through 6 years of being a guard. According to the rules, you can only join the swords tournament of Zakkaria in another 4 years."

"THEN EUGEO SHOULD WAIT FOR ANOTHER 4 YEARS! HOW CAN YOU JUST LEAVE ME ALONE AND LET EUGEO GO FOR IT WHEN HE'S NOT AS GOOD AS ME!!"

"Fm, then how are you going to prove this? How are you going to prove that you're stronger than Eugeo?"

"What..."

Jink and his father immediately flushed red. This time, it was his father who raged and closed in on Gasupht.

"EVEN IF YOU'RE THE VILLAGE CHIEF OF RULID VILLAGE, I CAN'T PRETEND THAT I DIDN'T HEAR THOSE OUTRAGEOUS WORDS! SINCE YOU SAY THAT MY SON'S SWORD SKILLS ARE INFERIOR TO A NOVICE, LET'S HAVE A DUEL NOW!"

On hearing that, the villagers immediately called out irresponsibly. They were all hoping wholeheartedly to watch this unexpected celebration's side event as they raised their mugs and stamped, shouting "DUEL, DUEL!"

Just when I spaced out, Jink challenged Eugeo, and Eugeo had to accept it. In the end, both of them had to face off against each other in the space that the crowd in front of the podium cleared out. Are you kidding me, I thought and whispered to Selka.

"I'll leave for a while."

"Wha, what are you trying to do?"

I didn't answer as I split the crowd and arrived in front of the fountain before moving over to Eugeo. In stark contrast to the enemy who was charging over like a ferocious horse, Eugeo's expression showed that he didn't know how to deal with this, and he heaved a sigh of relief as he saw me before whispering,

"Wh-what should I do, Kirito? Things seemed to have gotten quite big."

"It's pointless to apologize at this point. Forget about that. Are you really going to slash at each other in this duel?"

"No way? We're using swords, but it's only until the attack is inches from each other."

"Fuun... but if this sword doesn't stop while it attacks the enemy, the opponent will probably die. Listen, don't aim for Jink himself, but at his sword. Just charge at the side of the sword at the abdomen and use a «Horizontal» to end this."

"Re, really?"

"Absolutely, I promise."

I pat Eugeo on the back and nodded over at Jink and his old dad who were glaring at me with suspicious looks before retreating into the crowd.

On the podium, chief Gasupht clapped and shouted. SILENCE!

"Then— even though it wasn't planned, we'll have a duel between the guard captain Jink and the woodcut...no, swordsman Eugeo right now! Both sides will fight until the sword is inches away from each other, and no damage on each other's lives will be allowed, understood!?"

Before he even finished, *Shiing*, Jink drew out the sword at his waist, and Eugeo was a little slower as he drew his sword too. The villagers saw the Blue Rose Sword that was letting out a beautiful light as it shone under the bonfires.

It seemed that Jink was overwhelmed by the pressure of the opponent's sword. His head tilted back slightly before returning to its original position immediately. The young guard's face showed more anger, and he pointed at Eugeo with his left hand before saying unexpectedly.

"IS THAT SWORD REALLY YOURS, EUGEO? IF IT'S BORROWED, I HAVE THE RIGHT TO STOP YOU FROM USI ..."

Eugeo didn't wait for him to finish shouting as he answered with a determined attitude.

"This sword— I got it from the cave in the north. Right now, it belongs to me!"

The villagers immediately started muttering, and Jink couldn't say anything. I thought that he would ask Eugeo to prove his ownership, but Jink didn't seem to have that intention. Most likely, in this world where theft didn't exist, declaring one's ownership would clearly determine that it 'belonged to him or her' and doubting and asking this may be some violation of right.

—I didn't know if this guess of mine was correct or not, but Jink didn't continue as he spat twice on his own hands before raising his own sword up high.

On the other side, Eugeo wielded the sword with his right hand only and pointed the tip at the opponent's eyes. He moved his left arm and leg back, keeping his center of gravity low.

As several hundred villagers held their breaths as they watched, Gasupht raised his right hand up high, yelled BEGIN! and swung it down.

"UOOOHHH!!"

Just as I expected, Jink immediately rushed forward as he yelled out crudely, swinging down right from the front, and one might doubt if he would really swing until just inches away with that momentum—

"...!!"

At that moment, I gasped lightly. Jink's sword changed direction greatly in the air. He looked like he was going to swing from the top, but was actually swinging horizontally from the right. This was just an elementary feint, but if Eugeo followed my suggestion and got ready to use the «Horizontal» to aim at Jink's sword, it would be difficult for him to take on a horizontal swing with a horizontal swing, and may cause a miss before he gets hit by the opponent...

"I...yahh!!!"

The shout that was somewhat lacking in spirit as compared to Jink interrupted my thoughts immediately.

The skill Eugeo used wasn't «Horizontal».

He raised his sword on the right shoulder and looked like he was getting ready. The blade let out a slightly thick blue light. He looked like he was going to shake the earth as he stepped forward before drawing a sharp diagonal 45 degree arc in the air. This was... a skill I never taught him, the diagonal slash «Slant».

Eugeo, who was a moment late in his activation, let his sword move at lightning speed and hacked at Jink's sword that was swinging horizontally from above. I watched the iron blade get crushed easily and asked myself.

Eugeo must have used a wooden stick to practice the sword skill countless times once he got home. He properly discovered the existence of «Slant» during that practice, for there was no foreign sense of it being a last minute thing in that action just now. The united movement of Eugeo and the Blue Rose Sword dancing even had a sense of elegance to it.

As he continues to practice and learn more sword skills and even go through the hellish test of the battlefield, what level of a swordsman would he become? If...if I really have to fight him for real one day, could I actually last in front of him...?

The villagers watched this clean decisive victory nobody expected and cheered loudly. I clapped enthusiastically amongst them, and yet felt cold sweat flowing down my back.

The Jink father and son combo looked stunned as they backed away, and the music immediately rang. The atmosphere of the celebration was a lot more intense before, ending only when the church bell at the tower rang to signal that it was 10.

I drank another 3 mugs of apple cider before finally forgetting the uneasiness that came for no reason, joined in the dance again with a delighted drunken feeling, and was basically dragged by Selka back to the church in the end. At the entrance, Eugeo, who was smiling wryly, agreed to go off together with me tomorrow morning before leaving, and I finally managed to get back to my own room and collapsed on my back onto the bed.

"Really, even if it was a celebration, you drank too much, Kirito. Here, water."

I immediately gulped down the icy cold well water Selka handed over, and my mind was finally clear as I breathed out for a long moment. No matter how much beer I drank in Aincrad or Alfheim, I wouldn't get drunk, but it seemed that the beer in Underworld was the real deal. I thought that I should take note of this and I looked up at the girl who was standing beside me, looking worried.

"...Is, is there something?"

I didn't know what expression Selka saw on me as she was startled. I hurriedly lowered my head.

"Well... sorry. Aren't you going to talk to Eugeo more?"

Still in her best clothes, Selka's face immediately blushed a cherry color.

"What are you saying all of a sudden?"

"Because, tomorrow morning, you'll...no, I'll have to apologize first. Sorry that things developed such that it looks like I'm taking Eugeo out of the village. If that guy continued to cut wood in this village, maybe he might, well... form a family with you or something, Selka..."

Selka sighed hard and sat down beside me.

"Really, you, what are you saying..."

She just looked extremely surprised as she shook her head several times, and continued,

"...Well, never mind— Anyway, once Eugeo leaves the village, I'll definitely feel lonely... but, I'm happy too. Ever since Alice nee-sama had gone, Eugeo lived his days as if he had given up on everything and now he can smile so happily and decide to look for nee-sama. I think father must be rather happy to see him like this, because Eugeo never forgot about nee-sama."

"...Is that so..."

Selka nodded, lifted her head to look at the full moon outside the window, and continued.

"For me... actually, I didn't go over to the cave just to copy nee-sama and touch the land of the darkness. I knew I couldn't do that. Even though I knew... I still felt, even if it was just a little, I wanted to get closer to nee-sama. I wanted to get the nearest to her as I could... until I reached a place I couldn't advance forwards, and then from there on, I'll realize clearly... that I can't replace Alice nee-sama."

I pondered about the meaning of Selka's words, and shook my head slightly.

"No, you're amazing. Ordinary girls would have immediately went back once they reached the bridge outside the village or the path in the forest or the entrance of the cave. But you kept walking deep into the dark cave and found the goblin scouts. You did something only you could do."

"Only I... could do...?"

Selka widened her eyes and tilted her head. I nodded at her.

"You're not a substitute for Alice, Selka. You definitely have something only you have. You just need to nurture this talent."

In fact, I believe that from now on, Selka's sacred arts would improve greatly. That's because she sent the goblin squad retreating together with Eugeo and me, so her System Control Authority should have increased.

However, this wasn't a question of talent. She challenged what sort of person she was and got her answer. This itself would grant her a power stronger than anything else. Believing in oneself would be the greatest strength that could be created from a human's soul.

It's about time for me to try and find the answer to a question that was delayed by a certain will.

My consciousness— This me who is called Kirito or Kirigaya Kazuto, what exactly am I? Am I a Fluctlight residing inside a living brain, a «real me»? Or am I a «clone» taken from the real me by the STL and preserved in some medium?

There's only one way to check.

Eugeo, Selka and the other people of Underworld, their Fluctlights would never break the «Taboo Index» and the «Empire Fundamental Law» But even if I could break through the taboo in this world, it wouldn't mean that I

wasn't an artificial Fluctlight. I didn't know the clauses of the Taboo Index... in other words these rules were not written into my soul.

On the other hand, I had to check if I could use my will to break the one rule... morals I had always abided by throughout my entire life till now. I went through all sorts of thoughts during the past few days, but this was still rather difficult. Using the sword to hurt the villagers or stealing were definitely not within the boundary, but if it was just badmouthing someone just to check, it would be rather unreliable. Right now, I could only rely on this.

I turned around and stared at Selka's face as she sat right beside me.

"...What is it?"

I reached my hand out at Selka's puzzled looking face and apologized to Asuna and Yui deep inside my heart. I then said sorry to Selka herself, brought my face closer and placed my lips on the pure white forehead under her headband.

Selka's body jerked suddenly, and she didn't move. After 3 seconds, my face left Selka, and her cheeks were flushed so red it reached her ears as she stared directly at me.

"Wha... what, did you just do...?"

"I guess... it's most likely something like the «Oath of a Swordsman»."

I tried to find a decent excuse as I gritted my teeth once I realized something inside my heart.

As I did something that the real me definitely wouldn't do, I'm the real me. If I were a cloned FluctLight, I would have stopped automatically several millimeters away from Selka's forehead.

As I was thinking about this, Selka continued to look at my face and used her right hand to touch her forehead before sighing,

"An oath... that might be your country's tradition, but, if it wasn't the forehead but the... there might be Integrity Knights flying over now. That's something against the Taboo Index."

There was a part in the middle I didn't hear, but I didn't bother to ask. Selka shook her head again, showing a slight smile on her face, and asked me.

"Then... what is your oath?"

"Isn't that certain... Eugeo and I will go save Alice together and bring your sister back to this village. I assure you..."

I paused for a while, and then said the following words,

"Because I'm the Swordsman Kirito."

Part 6

The weather was wonderful the next morning.

While feeling the weight of the boxed-lunch Selka made for us in our right hands, Eugeo and I walked toward the south, along a road we wouldn't come back on for a long time.

When we arrived at the junction which lead to the narrow path toward the forest where Gigas Cedar once stood, I saw an old man standing there. The deeply wrinkled face was covered with a white moustache, his backbone was straight, the glint in his eyes looked like it could penetrate through me.

As soon as he saw the elder, Eugeo smiled happily and started running.

"Garitta-jii! I'm glad you are here. I didn't get to meet you yesterday."

I remembered when I had heard that name. He was surely the predecessor of the «Gigas Cedar cutting duty».

A tender smile floated under the moustache of the the elder Garitta as he placed his hands on Eugeo's shoulders.

"Eugeo, you certainly managed to cut down the Gigas Cedar, which I could only make a cut about a finger deep…… Could you tell me how you did it?"

"It was this sword and……"

Eugeo pulled the Blue Rose Sword out from the scabbard on his left waist slightly, then he turned and looked at me.

"More than anything, his…… it's thanks to my friend. His name is Kirito. He's really a ridiculous guy."

I hurriedly lowered my head while thinking 'What the heck is with that introduction.' Elder Garitta walked to me before giving me a piercing look with his sharp eyes —— and gave a broad smile immediately.

"So you're the rumored «Vector's lost child», huh. I see….. such a variable companion."

It was the first time I ever heard something like that, while I tilted my head trying to figure out the meaning of his words, the elder pointed his left hand toward the forest and continued speaking,

"Now, I'm sorry that I interfered with your long awaited departure, but I would like you to come with me for a little while. As I need you to do something."

"E-Err. Kirito, it's okay, right?"

I nodded as I didn't have any particular reason to deny the request. The elder smiled again, before beckoning us as he stepped on the narrow path into the forest.

Even though I only commuted along this path daily for a week, I sensed a deep emotion that felt like nostalgia, as we walked for about twenty minutes, before we arrived at the large clearing.

The ruler of the forest, which stood tall as if it could reach the heaven across the long centuries of time, now lay with its great body quietly. Thin ivy had started to clamber over its jet black bark, in a far distant future, I thought it would decay and return to the earth.

"……What is the matter with the Gigas Cedar, Garitta-jii?"

The elder didn't answer Eugeo's question but walked toward the top of the fallen trunk. We chased after him in a hurry, but were greeted by a maze which was created from the branches of the Gigas Cedar and the other trees intertwined together. When I looked carefully, the black branches of the Gigas Cedar, no matter how thin they were, there was not a single one which had been damaged, although some had pierced into the ground or the rocks. Their toughness was really astonishing.

We got some scratch wounds on our bare arms as we struggled through the branches, and before long, we arrived next to elder Garitta who looked

invigorating as he stood still. While using his palm to wipe the sweat off his forehead, Eugeo said in a grumble,

"What is here, exactly?"

"This."

What the elder pointed at, was the topmost point of the fallen Gigas Cedar, its treetop extended straight out. It was a small branch which hadn't grow yet, its length was considerably long, the tip was tapered sharply like a rapier.

"What's with this branch?"

To my question, the elder stretched his gnarled right hand and stroked the part of the treetop which was about five centimeters thick.

"In all of the branches of Gigas Cedar, this is the one which had inhaled the most blessing from Solus. Now, use that sword and cut it off from here. Cut it in a single blade strike, many strikes may damage it."

The elder used his hand to chop at the part about one meter and twenty centimeters from the tip, before taking several steps backward.

Eugeo and I exchanged glances with each other and nodded. After taking his boxed-lunch, I also stepped back.

When the Blue Rose Sword was drawn out of the scabbard, it shone brightly with a light blue under the sunlight, the elder beside me whispered a faint sigh. 'Perhaps everything would have changed if I had that sword when I was young,' —— I thought this kind of regret probably echoed within his mind, but glancing at his calm face, I couldn't read his mind at all.

Although Eugeo had set up his sword, he didn't move at all. The tip of the sword shaking slightly probably due to the hesitation in his mind. The branch which was as thick as the wrist, perhaps he doesn't have the confidence that he could sever it in one hit?

"Eugeo, let me do it."

As I stretched my hand forward, Eugeo nodded obediently and offered the hilt of the sword. After receiving the boxed-lunches, he went to stand next to the elder.

I stared at the black branch thoughtlessly, then swung the sword upward and immediately slashed it downward. Kishi— with a clear sound and a light response, the blade passed through the place I aimed at. The long black branch which fell down right after that was caught by the blade of the sword, before it sprung up. As it spun in the air while falling down, this time I caught it with my left hand. It was cold like ice and I slightly staggered due to the heavy weight on my wrist.

After I returned the Blue Rose Sword to Eugeo, I used both hands to offer the black branch to elder Garitta.

"Just wait a little bit."

As he said that, the elder took out a thick cloth from his bosom, before carefully wrapping the branch in my hands with it. In addition, he tied it up with a leather string.

"Now it's good. When you arrive at the capital Centoria, bring this branch to the north seventh ward, and give it to an artisan named Sadre, who set up his shop there. He will be able to make a powerful sword from it. It certainly wouldn't be inferior to that beautiful blue silver sword."

"R-Really, Garitta-jii!? That would be great, as I was worried about the future as we only have one sword even though there're two of us. Right, Kirito?"

Eugeo said in a happy voice, I replied with 'That's right,' as I nodded while smiling. But I could feel that the jet black branch in my open arms became slightly heavier as I rejoiced.

To both of us, who were bowing our heads repeatedly, the elder gave a smile.

"It's just my farewell gift. Be careful on the way. Because nowadays, there are not only good Gods reigning in this world. ……I'll stay here to watch this tree for a little bit. Farewell Eugeo and the young traveler."

After following the small path and exiting back to the main road again, the fine weather until now started to decline as some small black clouds sprung out from the east.

"The breeze is a bit humid now. We better go before it's too late."

"……That's right. Let's hurry."

I nodded in response to Eugeo, the leather string of the cloth wrapped branch of Gigas Cedar was firmly tied to my back. The thunderous roar from the far distance away resonated with the heaviness of the branch, and my mind trembled slightly.

A pair, two swords.

Is that a hint, a sign of something in the future?

Shouldn't I bury this parcel in the depths of this forest? that moment of thought made me stop moving. But, what is the reason that I fear it will be necessary? I don't get it at all.

"Hey, let's go, Kirito!"

As I lifted up my face, the bright smile of Eugeo, who was anticipating the unknown world, entered my eyes.

"Alright…… let's go."

It was just one week ago that we met, but for some reason I felt as if he had been my best friend for a long time, I walked side by side with the boy on the road extending to the south —— toward the heart of Underworld, the place where all answers to the puzzle were awaiting us, as we started to quicken our pace.

(Alicization Beginning End)

Afterword

This is Kawahara Reki. I have now delivered the first volume of 2012,『Sword Art Online 9 Alicization Beginning』.

Since the release of volume 8 last year, it had been half a year of vacant. During that time, under various circumstances many things happened, so first off, I have to apologize for the wait. I'm sorry! I'll do my best next time!

……Then, I feel like I should talk about this book's content, now… what should I write…… While I would like to avoid spoiling things for those who look ahead and read the afterword first, no matter how I put it, it'd still be a spoiler storm! So I decided to put a warning line. Please note that beyond the line would be the Dark Territory! Ha…… now let's start with the spoilers……

————————Spoiler Line————————

Volume 7 which has Asuna as the main character, and volume 8 which is a compilation of side stories, both took place before Kirito-sensei's new journey in volume 9. Although he traversed from the virtual game worlds of SAO, ALO, to GGO, the world this time is at last, prohibitively «Difficult new game», as he has to challenge it from level 1. ……Although that was how it should be…… but he was able to use various sword skills right off the bat, please put it as love and respect……

As the writer myself, I tried many new things in the world which made an appearance in this volume, the «Underworld». To give a concrete example, Kirito didn't meet a girl…… err no, that wasn't the case; how far the straight fantasy ball using the net game context could go, about NPC, or in the other words, AI, which hadn't been touched up close until now, how could I focus on that, I want to expand the wrapping cloth to the limit of the «VRMMO stuff» using those things. When thinking about how to have the story unfold later, it made me feel like working harder on the next volumes!

Then the next, while it might belatedly, I want to talk about the animation adaptation of this『Sword Art Online』. As I started writing at the end of 2001, and was silently serializing『SAO』the following year at the corner of the web novel world, I thought about the day that it would become an anime…… I remember the time that I said "Let's make a GIF anime" with no confidence at all. This miracle was only made possible because of the the hard work of the illustrator abec-san; Miki-san who is in charge and said three years ago "Let's publish this too!"; Tsuchiya-san, the assistance,

whose HP bar of his tight schedule stays in deep red; and all readers who continue supporting the works from this writer, I thank you again. Of course, this original novel is still far from finished!

A certain day in December 2011, Kawahara Reki

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Illustrator : abec

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